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May 28, 1895.

No. 931.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 cents.

Vol. XXXVI.



THE SPORT FIXED HIS EYES FIRMLY ON THE FACE OF THE GIANT

OR, BIG BURK'S BLUFF.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "THE TIE-TO SPORT," "FARO
FRANK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BILLY BIRD'S BROTHER.

"Say, sport, be you really goin' downe thar?"

"It's so reported, little man; and the sooner I get there the better it will please me."

"Glad ter hear thar's a chance fur one man ter be happy, but mebbe you don't jest know what sorter a seckshun ov Paradise yer a droppin' inter. Ef I war you, an' you war

me, I'd jest turn round an' go somewheres else. If it's a hard ole hole fur me, whar'll you kin in at?"

The sport laughed lightly, and yet he gave a keener glance at the boy than he had yet taken. There was something about him that said he was not exactly talking to hear himself talk, and the traveler was quick to take notice of such things.

"Pretty tough camp, is it? Sorry for the news, for I am of a retiring sort myself, and don't like to have neighbors of the other stripe. Now, if they were all like you. Strikes me you just about hit my gait."

"Ef I do, you must be a holy terror."

The sport paid no attention to the interruption, but went on:

"Modest, retiring, unobtrusive, shy, not at all inquisitive, timid rather than otherwise, and a lad of strictly truthful proclivities. Yes, I am inclined to think you fill the bill. You must be my long-lost brother. At least, if I had one. What shall I call such a paragon?"

"Billy Bird, if you want to put on style. Ef we should happen to be pards, jest plain Billy. I heard you war comin', and kinder thought I might like you myself. Shake, pard!"

The boy extended his hand with the cordial ease of an equal, and the sport in black velvet grasped it in the same spirit, though the look of amusement had left his face.

"You heard I was coming, did you? Must be something of a spiritualist, for until this morning I didn't know I was on the way myself."

"This mornin' yer met an old coon on a claybank with one wall eye jest whar' ther trail forks on the top ov ther long divide. He hed a double-barrel shotgun. He stopped yer fur a light fur his pipe, and you axed him whar' ther left-hand trail went to, and when he told yer to Black Gorge, yer laughed, an' said 'Jest ez well thar' ez anywhar', an' hyer yer be. I war kinder cur'us ter know ef you war comin', and yit I knowed in course yer would."

As the boy reeled off this extraordinary story, the stranger sport's expression changed from one of good-natured amusement to one of intense surprise.

The place where the trails crossed, on the top of the long divide, was fully forty miles away, yet everything had there happened just as the boy narrated.

When he spoke he showed nothing of wonder, however, for his voice had the same suspicion of humor in it, and the good-natured smile had come back to his lips.

"If you don't mind showing your back to a friend, suppose you turn around once. Just a glimpse, you understand, and I'll hold my hands 'way up over my head while you are doing it if you say so."

"Oh, me behindus are jest ez good lookin' as me befrontus, an' you kin keep yer han's whar yer blamed please. Ther ole lady put that patch on ez a fair mark ter aim at, but I ain't afeared you'll try ter give me a h'ist."

As he spoke he turned slowly around, lifting the tail of a ragged and mile-too-big coat to show the big, square patch on the seat of his pantaloons.

"Ahem! That makes it as uncertain as ever. You're sure it's sewed fast?"

"What's fast?"

"That patch. It looks mighty much as though it might be a door. The fact is, I am inclined to think that if you are not his Satanic Majesty himself, you are one of his imps, and I am looking for a three-pronged tail."

Billy broke into a laugh this time, and eyed the stranger with keen enjoyment.

"Then it all war' true?"

"True to the letter; but, how in the name of all the fiends did you come to know it? I could believe that the man had been sent there to turn me off on this trail; but how could you know the exact words I used when I made up my mind? Billy, my boy, there's something singular about this thing, and I'll have to see into it a little."

"Sing'lar ain't no name fur it. But, say, pard, you ain't give me no handle yit, an' ther spooks furgot ter menshun it."

"Spooks, eh? That must be it. And they drew the line at my name, did they? I'm glad to know they have some modesty. Call me? How does Methuselah strike you as a name for an all-around sport? A number one, native built, and American register?"

"Hits me hard. Think ernother one like it 'd kill me, sure. Can't yer think ov s'uthin' sweeter?"

"Oh, yes—Sugar Bill, for instance. Fix it to suit yourself. I haven't any particular name of my own, but I'll answer to 'most anything if I only know the reason why."

"Et don't edzackly fit," answered Billy, scratching his head in some perplexity. "You ain't percisely that kind ov a tough; but ef yer likes it let her go at that. When yer comes ter Black Gorge yer kin take yer ch'ice, an' ef folks don't like it you kin fight fur it. Reckon we've chinned hyer long enough, an' ef you'll straddle yer mustang, we'll be gittin' on inter town."

"But you haven't told me yet how you came to be possessed of that wonderful bit of intelligence, and I'd like to know if you are as wise about all strangers coming to town as you seem to be about me."

"Pends on mam. When she gits inter one ov her spells she kin say a heap; an' it's allers true. That's her biz. Jest ez you sed: She kin talk with ther sperrits, an' she's beginnin' ter make it pay. They kin ter ax her 'bout things, an' she makes 'em spud out their coin. One ov 'em kin this mornin', an' I laid back sly an' easy an' got ther hull ov ther buzzin'. So thar's some 'un else besides me expectin' yer at ther Gorge, er thar'abouts—an' it ain't mam, either. She never knows what she's bin sayin' when she gets through."

"Ah, then some one was asking questions about me? That is strange. I have no knowledge of any one at Black Gorge who by any possibility could or would care to ask about me. Who was it that inquired?"

"Oh, kin off. Yer axin' me ter let down on mam's biz. I give it away too much, ez it are. Hev' ter lay low an' keep yer eyes open, same way ez I do. You jest run yer own clam wagon till trade gits slack afore yer axes me ter blow yer horn, Be yer comin'?"

Billy gave a whistle, and the pony which had been browsing around came up to the call. His master tumbled into the saddle, and the sport swung himself on the back of his mustang.

Down the gulch they could see the huddled camp of Black Gorge. It was still a mile or more distant, but in that pure, clear air, it was plainly visible, and the sport held his horse a moment, with a light touch on the rein, while he took a view of the place and its surroundings.

"Ain't much ter look at, but et's a heap sight better ner it looks, an' ef yer spry with ther pasteboards an' kin shoot quick, thar ain't no reason why a man with a move on shouldn't do well thar'. Ther jedge plays a mighty stiff game, an' it makes him mad ter hear ov a limit. But then, ez he allers wins, I dunno how it would be ef he run ag'in' some one that would make him hussel. You kin try him an' see."

"That's a very good scheme, Billy, if it wasn't for one thing. I reckon Black Gorge is like most places of its kind. It takes money to buy land, and when I was looking down into the valley, about the time you hailed me, I was thinking how I was going to raise the price of a supper. The fact is, I'm dead gone broke, and the limit don't interest me as much as how to raise the first ante."

Billy looked at him inquiringly. He let his eyes run all over the young man in velvet before speaking again. Then he seemed to have made up his mind.

"Ef I reely thought you could han'le ther case, I dunno' but what I'd stake yer myself. I'm lookin' fur a pard thet's a man all over, an' clean white, 'sides not bein' afeared ov anything on two legs er four. Fer sich I kin afford ter pay big wages. How'd yer like ter sign a scale fur a week er two? Then, ef we pulled well tergether, I might give yer a stiddy job."

Billy talked with all the grandeur of a millionaire, and yet had all the looks of a young vagabond who lived by his wits and wore cast-off clothing.

The sport was more serious than ever.

"Say, kid, that yarn about the spooks is sticking in my craw, I suppose, and I can't think all this chin of yours is nonsense. It's a fact that I'm open for 'most any kind of a job that is square till I can get on my feet again. Of course, I have this mustang and my tools, but I don't care to part with them, though that was what I expected to do if the worst came to the worst. If you can keep me afloat till I strike something that pays better, I'm your man."

They were not in so much of a hurry as they thought about going down to Black Gorge.

"Now yer shoutin'! Put her thar', pard. Put her thar'! An' ez it'll be convenyunt fur you ter 'pear ez my long-lost brother, w'ich you spoke about a bit ago, an' ez thar' can't well be two Bills in ther fambly, we'll hev' ter reorganize that name a trifle. How'll Sugar Sam suit?"

"Oh, anything in reason, so no one ever heard it before. Now, what's the layout?"

"Oh, I ain't certain an' sure yit. We'll find that out, later on. Ther f'ust thing are ter git ther old lady ter sling out some grub, and after that we'll float 'round town and see what we can pick up. Guess I kin find enough ter keep yer busy."

"Brother goes, then. Let's be moving. To a lad of your penetration it is hardly worth while to remark that in the absence of dinner the scant breakfast I had renders the need of a supper actually pressing. We'll try a whirl with the old lady, anyhow."

Without delay the two cantered down the trail at a lively pace, and went sweeping into town.

They came just in time for business.

In front of the Arcade there was a swaying crowd, listening to a man who was making them an address from a box. He was well dressed, of commanding appearance, and though he spoke without passion, he seemed to have the crowd with him.

"That's ther jedge," said Billy, as the two came racing up.

"Et's part ov yer ob ter back ther other man."

CHAPTER II.

A NECKTIE SOCIAL.

Judge Lane was a representative and leading man of Black Gorge.

He came there with the rush, and prospered in a twofold way. He owned the best mining property in the district, and from the first had played the stiffest game of cards put up in the camp, and the men whom he met were all chiefs.

As a result, he had the finest residence

in the camp, and the handsomest lady in it to preside over his table.

The lady, however, was not his wife, but his niece, who had made her appearance shortly after the judge's great clean-up with Oro Jack, and was very popular with the inhabitants.

Although the judge might have been alcalde of the camp on its first organization, and mayor later on, when it had become more thoroughly Americanized, his title was one of courtesy, for he had sternly refused all such honors.

But as there was no reason save his modesty that he was not a judge, people for the most part thought he must be one, and so spoke of him as "the judge."

The speech he was making now was not exactly a Fourth of July oration.

There were three prisoners in the heart of the crowd, and until the judge commenced speaking there had been very little doubt as to what was going to be done with them.

They had been captured just at the end of the town, along with three horses which belonged to three inhabitants of Black Gorge.

The usual thing would have been to string them up at once, but in this case, as the men had yielded without resistance, and two of them had little to say for themselves, while the third insisted it was all a mistake, the party was brought in by their captors, to have some sort of a public examination.

Unfortunately, as it seemed, Black Gorge was inclined to have the frolic off-hand, and the examination afterward. The crowd collected with the average mysteriousness attending such proceedings, and before the case was fairly stated the cry arose to hang them.

To this the owner of one of the horses was the first to object, and he was not very positive in his way of doing it.

It started a conservative movement, however, and just as Billy Bird and the sport rode up the judge was making an address on the subject.

"I'm not sure that it is a good thing to be too hasty," Lane was saying, "though I will admit that in all the camps I was ever in that was the rule."

"It's about the only way to keep such characters out of a town, and when I was younger I generally went with the crowd in such things; but I have got old enough now to want to have a dead sure thing in front of me before making up my mind. Even then I am not certain but what, at a first offence, it might not be well to start the thieves out of camp with a rope around their necks, and a warning that if they ever return here again there will be willing hands to pull upon it."

"That's good, sound talk, and a heap of logic in it," chimed in Bidwell Sloan, the sporting gent who ran the Arcade saloon.

"A hanging-bee like that just rips the town all up for a week, and we can't really afford to have one, though, of course, if you all think it must be so, let her went. I can stand it if the rest can. Don't you think, judge?"

"The matter is not in my hands. I only want to caution the people that after the fun is over it is too late for regrets."

"And we'd better hear what they got to say," threw in a helping voice from the crowd.

"They can probably tell a little better lie than the rest of us could imagine, and as they appear to be pards together, they will all be apt to stick to it, and it will be hard to catch them napping. All I wanted to suggest was that judgment had perhaps better be tempered with mercy, and the fellows simply banished."

"Thar's suthin' rotten 'bout it," whispered Billy to the sport; "but, blamed ef

I kin see percisely what it are. Kinder looks ez though he wanted ter hev' 'em hung, and didn't jest darst ter do it."

"All right. You're the boss. Which side are we to chip in on?" asked the sport, without more than average interest in the question.

"Whichever way it's to go it looks as though we would have to fight the town."

"Oh, we'll jest hang back an' see how ther blame cat hops. We're sorter neutral, with a strong leanin' ter ther hoss thieves ef two on 'em warn't so blamed disrespectable."

The two alluded to by Billy were hard-looking cases, and that was a fact.

The third prisoner was ragged and weather-beaten, but a good deal younger, and his face did not bear the stamp of dissipation like those of the others. He had been evidently waiting to hear how things were going, and now he broke in:

"I told you before, this was all a mistake so far as I am concerned. I had nothing to do with the horses, and I never saw these men until a few minutes before the crowd came out and captured them."

An incredulous murmur went up from the crowd.

"It is the truth. I was tramping along when I met them, and they stopped to speak with me. While we were talking you men came, and, without giving me a chance to explain, dragged me here."

"Oh, my, how thin!" murmured Bidwell Sloan, who was something of a liar himself.

"It is the truth! Every word truth!"

The young man singled out the speaker with his eyes, and spoke angrily. Probably, he did not realize the danger he was in.

"What war' ye doin' chinnin' so comfortable-like with sich ez them ef ye war'n't pards?" asked the owner of one of the horses.

"I was tramping, I'll admit; but that is no crime. I came here in search of an uncle of mine; a man by the name of Lane. Perhaps some of you have heard of him. I understand he came here with the first settlers."

"Come, young man, you have overshot the mark there," said the judge, calmly. "I believe I am the only Lane in this avenue, and I came with the rush, but no nephew of mine can you be, since I own no such article. Better stick to the truth, or even my influence, which I would be glad to give to a young man who for the first time has been drawn into bad ways, cannot save you."

"You?" said the young man, looking sharply at the judge.

For a moment he stood silent after that one word, and the crowd gave a general grin, while the two older prisoners winked at each other in spite of the situation.

"Say, fedge," said one of the guards, "it looks ez though this might be a sorter fambly matter, an' we don't blame yer fur not wantin' ter own up ter sich a durned crooked Lane ez that. Jest you run this hyer thing ter soot, an' Black Gorge aint' a grumblin'. Say ther word, an' we'll turn 'em loose, er string 'em up! Et's all ez you say."

The crowd laughed.

It was a cold, cruel laugh, but it meant that the rage for blood was abating, and that there was at least a fighting chance for life with the culprits. Lane had not been appealing for mercy very strongly, and to the notion of Billy Bird he had got more than he bargained for. Nevertheless, he gave his judgment promptly and without a sign of irritation.

"You prisoners had better take advantage of the opportunity without any more such efforts at excuse. If they didn't strain you, they might cause the crowd to put in enough assistance to make it a sure

thing. The sentence of this court is that you leave this camp on foot, and at once, and if you are found again within a ten-mile limit within twenty-four hours you will be hung by the neck. If you return later on you will be shot on sight."

"Thankee, boss, that's white, an' ther pure quill. We'll take yer edvise, an' next time we travels 'round Black Gorge we'll do it on foot."

The second of the trio said nothing, but ducked his head in a modest attempt at a bow. Without parley they started off through the lane that was opened for them through the crowd.

The third, the younger man, did not seem to be in any haste.

If appearances went for anything he intended to make a speech. He straightened himself up, and looked around him with an air of courage that did not seem to be at all a sham. He even glanced at the box from which the judge had made his brief address.

"Better travel, young man, while the way is open to you," said Bidwell Sloan. "If you prefer the rope, it's here, and it won't wait long."

There was no mistaking the temper of that crowd, and the young fellow glared around, picking out, face by face, the men who had been foremost in the affair, his gaze resting longest of all upon the face of the judge.

Then he, too, turned away, but not in the direction taken by the two ruffians. Directly the opposite course did he take, and he strode away with a quick, springy step, totally unlike the slouching, hangdog march of the others.

It struck the crowd.

"Say, there can't have been any mistake about it, can there?" asked Sloan, who was a judge of men by virtue of his profession.

"There might have been," replied Lane, "if he had left my name out; but when he rung that in it was a sure enough thing the fellow was a fraud, even if he wasn't a horse thief. Let it go at that."

"Let her go at that, sure enough," whispered Billy Bird, to the stranger sport, who had been silently noting the principles of Black Gorge justice. "Et's gittin' on to'ards dark, an' et's time fur grub."

He led the way from the crowd, which seemed to have paid them no attention, and went directly to a cabin on the outskirts of the town.

The two picketed their horses, and then Billy preceded his guest into the cabin.

"Git a russel on, morm; hyer's brother. Sam kim ter visit us. He's hungry ez a b'ar, an' kin eat fur three."

"It's riddy, Billy, all riddy. Didn't ther speerits tell me. Make yerself at home, Sammy. Yer me long lost ch-e-ilde."

CHAPTER III.

BILLY BIRD BECOMES A BOSS.

As Mrs. Bird offered no particular evidences of affection, her greeting did not cause the sport any uneasiness.

He observed that the rough table was set for three, and that the bacon on the stove was done to a turn, and was being kept hot, while the aroma of the coffee was peculiarly grateful.

Billy motioned him to a chair, and seated himself, while the old woman hastily slid on the supper. Before it was fairly on the table Billy had fallen to, and his companion did not hesitate to follow his example.

When the edge was a little taken off his appetite the sport looked around, though not in an inquisitive or offensive manner.

The shanty was not large, but it seemed to have two rooms, and, though everything was cheap, it was clean, and there

was no indication of biting poverty. He mentally decided that he might have found a very much worse place to pass the night in, but he was by no means sure how he would like to have a boy of Billy Bird's caliber for a boss.

"Queer sort of a circus that," he remarked, as he saw the boy look up finally as though he was ready for some conversation. "Looked as though there might be something behind it all. Ever see any of the gang before?"

"Yep."

"I thought they weren't quite as much strangers as some of the crowd tried to let on. The judge, now. He struck me as knowing a heap more than he wanted to say; and the two who went off together gave him a side glance now and then as if they weren't sure what he wanted, but thought they ought to be."

"Oh, I ain't sayin' thet ther judge must be a side pard, though it began ter look a leetle like that way. It's fu'st 'pearance hyer fur them ducks, an' I reckon it'll be ther last. Bi'n a year since I seen 'em, an' that war at Boot Jack, a hard ole town, down on ther border. They war cattle thieves an' rustlers then, an' they don't look ez though they bi'n gittin' much higher up sence. Wish't I knowed more 'bout ther other duck. What's ther judge got ag'in' him?"

"I'll never tell."

"Then that's one ov ther things you kin sot yerself ter find out. Ef I know ary thing, that young galoot ain't goin' ter stay bluffed, an' he's got bizzness in Black Gorge, spel't with a great big B."

"And you expect to be helping him in it?"

"Dun'no' yit, but it looks that way. Can't set up ther seegars, but thar's a pipe ter top off with," said the boy, as they rose from the table, and pointing at a shelf.

"Don't smoke much meslf, but hev' ther rooderments handy. Got ter fill in ther time somehow tell things flare up at ther big Arcade, whar' I'm goin' ter take ye fur ther evenin's divershuns."

When it came to doing her duty at the table, Mrs. Bird seemed to be a silent, every day sort of a mortal, wholly unconcerned about such things as spooks and spirits, and the sport paid no particular attention to her in this everyday sort of a mood. She seemed to recognize her son as the man about the house, and he went and came without question, according to present appearances.

"Lucky sort of a sport, be ye?" asked Billy, when the smoke had begun to roll upward from where they sat, outside of the door.

"Not particularly, or I wouldn't be here. Generally a hitch somewhere about the time I think I have a cinch on something."

"What's yer vanity? Does yer yearn most fer buckin' ther tiger, er do yer cotton-down to short keyards ez a reg'lar thing?"

"Well, Billy, I generally blow in at the tiger what I win at the other games, and if I didn't get a sort of living at it as I go along I'd have had to quit long ago. As a speculation in that line I am afraid you have not made a success."

"I'm not thinkin' 'bout that. What I'm after are ter make out whar' I kin put you ter work so ez you'll lose ther least money. I ain't a Goulderbilt er a Maskor, an' I don't want yer ter swamp me while yer gittin' inter ther swim ov Black Gorge s'ciety."

"That's it, is it? Don't worry. Give me a ten as a starter, and I can hold my end up for an evening or so. I'll only chip when I feel it in my bones that it's coming my way. As long as I do that, things keep on a tolerably even keel."

He named the amount a little doubtfully, but the boy seemed relieved.

He drew out a wallet and handed out two fives in a way that showed it did not hurt him.

"I'm thinkin' you never heard ov Billy Bird. He ain't much ter look at, but he's a good 'un to go, an' when there's coin afloat he allers gits thar ez well ez a bigger feller. Down on ther border they knowed me; an' they ain't prezackly ignorunt hyer. Ef I shoose to take a flyer at ther Arcade you bet Sloan ain't a barrin' me out. I kerry a weepin, an' when I'm crowded she talks."

The conversation stretched itself along until the evening was fairly advanced, and without anything more definite in their arrangements, the two sauntered off toward the Arcade.

The Arcade was the principal saloon in town, though there were several others which in some respects crowded it close.

Bidwell Sloan, who ran the institution, was a sport who was generally liked, and he knew how things ought to be done. He was supposed to deal a square game when he had the box, and never refused to stake a man he had cleaned out with the cards.

As to the saloon, he always allowed the boys to have their little fun as long as they let those alone who were not in it, and did no permanent damage to his property.

On this particular evening the Arcade was doing a rushing business, as every one was there to talk about the horse thieves and their trial, and discuss the probabilities of the outfit taking it out on the camp for their somewhat ragged treatment.

No one seemed to have ever seen the three strangers before, and there was much speculation as to where they came from, and where they were bound for. The barroom was full, and the game in the adjoining room had not opened yet, though it was long after the time when the dealing usually began.

The dealer was there, sitting listlessly behind the table, but the layout had not yet been spread, and the young lady who, at present, was presiding over the destinies of the bank did not appear at all impatient for the labors of the evening to begin.

And a young lady it was who at present manipulated the cards at the Arcade.

Miss Ila Arbelle was as well known in Black Gorge as was her employer, and, being of the other sex, was even more popular.

Concerning her past life little was known, for she had made her appearance behind the table one evening without any previous announcement, and dealt the cards with a skill and grace which appeared to indicate long practice and thorough knowledge of the game.

Bidwell gave no satisfactory answers to any questions in regard to her, and though some professed to believe it was because he knew nothing to tell, others thought that therein lay the greater mystery.

She had the appearance of a mystery.

Tall and stately, she had the color of perfect health, and her black eyes shone with all the fire of youth; but her face had in repose a sadness about it that had been often remarked, though men were careful how they commented on it. Miss Ila really seemed to have an uncertain temper, and though usually mildness itself, she carried a revolver which on several occasions had been used with precision.

By some it was thought the judge was more than a little interested in the young lady, though his attentions had

been by no means marked. Still, the few words he sometimes let drop seemed to indicate there might be something of an understanding between the two; and perhaps the idea saved Miss Arbelle from other attentions which would have been distasteful. Lane was not a man to be interfered with unless one wanted to take large chances.

The curtain between the saloon and the gambling hall was partially thrust aside, and when Miss Arbelle glanced through the opening, as she occasionally did, she could see a good deal of what was going on.

She saw Billy Bird enter, and along with him the stranger.

At sight of the latter she gave a start, faint perhaps, but one that could have been noted had one been watching her.

Then, from time to time she glanced into the saloon again, and always her eyes sought the stranger sport as though she was studying him for a purpose.

The sport lounged in easily, and very much at home in his manner. He was not certain how the presence of the boy would be taken, for he was not receiving everything the lad told him exactly as gospel, but he hoped that in such a mixed company the youngster would not be too fresh. If he kept his sharp tongue moderately quiet it was likely things would go on tolerably smoothly, even if Black Gorge was a town of exceeding toughness, and the Arcade not exactly a missionary station.

The proprietor happened to be in their path to the bar, and Billy wasted no time in putting matters on a proper basis.

"Evenin', Mr. Sloan. Brother ov mine, this hyer be. Sam, by name, an' big ez outdoors by natur'. Brung him round ter-night ter git a sight ov yer manajhery, and ef he don't seem ter be growlin' too loud he may take a hack at yer tiger. Wot's yer limit ter-night?"

"Evening yourself, Billy, and glad to meet a brother of yours. If he strokes them gently he won't be apt to find our caravan at all vicious. The limit here, Billy, is generally the roof; but if you think there can't be enough chips stacked up under that we'll jack it up a foot or two, and let you pile them on. Desperate player is Billy, but we let him have a turn now and then for good luck."

The latter part of this was addressed to the sport, who listened with a smile, and made a few remarks. Then there were others who had something to say, and in a few moments he was altogether at home.

That is, he was at home as far as he was concerned, though it was just as it happened with the others. There were some who were cordial; and there were a few who looked as though they did not take kindly to the late arrival. Why that might be he did not ask, nor did he appear to notice. He held his own counsel until a movement started for the other room, and then he went along.

The layout had been spread, and Miss Ila Arbelle, box in hand, was about to open the game.

"A few chips, if you please," said the sport, as he threw down ten dollars.

And then he placed them all on the queen.

CHAPTER IV.

WON ON THE TURN.

The queen won.

"A good omen!" said the man in velvet, as he drew in half of his chips, and left the rest as they were.

Then the queen lost.

"Queen again. I may as well find out how the lady feels toward me. I suspect she's kind of off and on. But if

she don't smile on me at least half the time I may as well quit."

Billy Bird had followed the sport to the table, and stood at his elbow. He looked on a little grumly when he saw the whole of the capital he had furnished for business left to the chances of the turn of a single card. When the queen won again he felt better, and when he saw her win for the fourth time he strongly suspected that it was his man's night on.

After that, however, the sport did not play with any particular recklessness. Five and ten-dollar bets he made. Sometimes he lost, though oftener he won. In the course of an hour he was about a hundred dollars ahead of the game, when he decided to pull out, for that seemed to be the signal that Billy was making.

"Chips are as good as a draft, I guess; and I'll just hold on to them and finish my game later on. Come, Billy."

He swept the chips into his pocket, and with a nod to the dealer, and a more sweeping one to the players, turned to leave the room.

Sloan was not present, and if he had been he was not the sort to object, though it might look a little young in the evening for a true sport to leave.

Still he had not hit the bank hard enough to go far toward breaking it, and the other players, who would have only been too glad to leave off winners to the same tune, could have nothing to say.

"Don't be in too big er hurry 'bout goin' home ter mam. Jest kinder sashay 'round a bit tell yer sees of thar' ain't goin' ter be some fun. I tho't it war' time ter pull out ov ther game, but ther s'loon's good enough fur a few minnits yit, I'm beettin' thar's goin' ter be d'velopments."

"You little rat!" muttered the man in velvet to himself, and then looked up at the party just entering the door. The instincts of Billy Bird were a queer thing. Perhaps the spirits had something to do with them in this case, too. Certain it was that it looked as though there might be some sort of a racket if the new comers were to be judged by their appearance.

The leader—for there was quite a company—was a man of herculean build.

"Hoop-la! Hyar we be, Big Burk! Out ter paint ther town red. I'm lookin' fur the crimson, an' ther rest kerries ther buckits. Whar' am I ter begin ter let out ther flood elixur? It'll take a heap, an' ther night's monst'us early."

"I jest b'in a yearnin' fur ages ter hev' some 'un call Burk down, an', sport, I reckon et's your job," whispered Billy, without moving his head, however.

"I b'in a thinkin' ov tryin' him myself, but kept a puttin' it off. Keep yer peepers peeled, though. He ain't no slouch, an' Sloan hisself hannels him with kid gloves."

It was plain the crowd were not strangers to the regular visitors of the Arcade, and their advent was taken as a matter of course; and by some as a pleasant variety. Bidwell Sloan showed no particular disgust.

Watching him it was not hard to see that he recognized Big Burk as a mighty chief, with whom any war would be a fight to the death, but who, meantime, was a profitable customer, who should be allowed a certain amount of latitude.

"Walk up, you two-legged critturs, an' h'ist. We'll tetch Biddy, hyar, lightly, an' then go on to ther next place, but afore ther night's over we'll hev' a he-ole jamboree, an' don't yer furgit it. I'm r'ally itchin' ter carve a few chunks with some gerloot thet thinks he knows what's what, but thar' ain't no chance fur that hyar."

He stared around as if in the vain hope that some one would take up the challenge, yet no one cared to respond.

"Big Burk, an' sp'ilin' fur fun! Won't somebody only try ter salt me down? He kin have five minnits' start an' all ther weight he chooses. Any odds I kin give I'll give fur jest a squar' mossel ov fun."

No one cared to give him the morsel of fun for which he was pining. The sport set him down at once in his own mind as one of those terrors who periodically must have a brawl and a debauch, though otherwise only dangerous when willfully affronted. If no one crossed him he was likely to go after a spell of harmless bluff.

The man in velvet sank into a seat, while Billy stood near, his eyes glistening, and a broad smile on his sun-burned face.

At the loud invitation nearly every one had moved up to the bar, and the sport might have done so, too, had he been sure he was included. He found there was no doubt on the subject a little later.

Burk's gaze sought him out.

"Stranger, yer o'rt ter hev' heard me shout, but ef yer deaf I mout cut a hole ter let ther sound go in. I sed, kim up an' h'ist! Ef you've no objectshuns we're a waitin' on yer."

"No objections in the world. Only too modest to push in where I wasn't sure I was invited. Happy to join you."

The sport's smile was a wonderful contrast to the frown of Big Burk, the giant, and he arose with an alacrity which called forth something of a laugh from the spectators.

"An' now, Ily, kim out fur w'unst an' drink with yer Uncle Benjamin. He ain't so good lookin', but thar's a mighty sight ov him, an' all good, solid meat."

The curtains which ordinarily closed the way to the other room were wide open, and Miss Arbelle sat facing him as he stood at the bar.

The young lady did not change color at the address, though her black eyes seemed to give a sudden, vicious snap as she slowly rose and glided forward.

"That's right, Miss Ily. Yer Uncle Benjamin thinks heaps ov yer, an' when he sets 'em up fur ther crowd he ain't goin' ter leave you be left out in ther cold. Name yer drink an' Biddy'll set her up."

"You infernal villain!" was Miss Arbelle's answer. "If there is no man here to take my part, I'll take it myself. Speak to me once again after that fashion and I'll shoot you dead where you stand."

CHAPTER V.

THE SPORT TAKES A HAND.

Miss Arbelle's hand held a revolver as she spoke, and she evidently "meant business." For a moment the dropping of a pin could almost have been heard in the Arcade.

Then Burk himself broke the silence.

He turned his back squarely upon Miss Ily, while he raised his two great paws.

"Whoop! hooray! Ain't she a daisy? Thar' ain't ther man livin' bez ther pluck ter say what she said ter Big Burk, an' she jest chanted it off as though it war' goin' ter tickle me ter glory."

The sport fixed his eyes on the face of the giant.

"Stranger," he said, in a soft, low, voice. "I don't know much about you, but from what I have seen it strikes me that the lady was about right, and if she don't shoot I'll do something else quite as effective."

"One man ter talk to at last! Consider et all said. How'll yer hev' et, an' whar'?" He looked the sport over while his arm

went back. A second more, and he might have cast the knife, but he had not altogether forgotten Miss Arbelle, who was behind him.

"Hold!" she exclaimed. "Try that, and I drop you before the blade can leave your hand. Fair play, sir, or take what you get."

The handsome sport was nattily dressed in a suit of black velvet which set off his figure and complexion to a charm, but he did not look like a dude, and the fact of his being the champion of a woman would put all Black Gorge on his side, for the moment, at least.

He controlled himself by an effort, and his hand sank once more by his side.

"I'm riddy ter hear reason, ef you two want ter talk et. Arter that I'll be goin' fur blood an' ha'r, so yer better cut et short an' hev' ther fun soon over. You may scoop me, but you kin bet yer bottom dollar thet ther boys'll hev' ther dead meder-cin' on him."

"Excuse me, miss; but if it's all the same to you it would make things a heap more comfortable if you draw out. If this man is a chief, he is going to act like one. If he don't, I reckon I can take care of myself. I've always done it up to the present time."

"Now yer shoutin'! Start even, an' ther best man gits ther onder holt. Git yer weepin out, an' then we'll sail in."

Billy gave a sigh of relief and softly let down the hammer of the derringer in his side pocket. Miss Arbelle had spoken just in time to save him from taking a hand in, and under the circumstances he preferred to remain in the reserve.

Miss Arbelle did not put away her revolver, since she was not yet sure what was the intention of Big Burk, but she fell back a pace or two, watching the sport in velvet rather than his huge antagonist.

For a brother of Billy Bird the stranger was acquitting himself very creditably. His eyes never left the face of the giant, but with a deft, easy motion he threw off his coat and stood there, a young Adonis, in his shirt-sleeves.

"Look out fur me! I'm a comin'!" shouted the giant, evidently eager for the fray.

It was a fair warning, and Burk sprang forward, his knife high upraised.

The movement was quick, but the sport leaped like a line of light, a bright blade appearing in his hand.

With wonderful certainty his knife struck that of the other with a sharp cling, forcing it upward and causing the Hercules to swerve.

The sport did not pause, or appear to attempt to recover himself, but darted past, aiming a swift blow as he went.

The stroke severed the belt around the waist of the other, which, with the array of arms it carried, fell to the floor, and a swift kick sent it into the hands of the watchful Billy.

Burk wheeled, and it seemed as though he had caught his adversary napping. Straight downward he struck—a blow which would have split a dollar had it hit it fair; but it struck—nothing!

The young Apollo pivoted a little on his left foot, swayed backward a trifle, and, with his hand drawn back so that it almost rested against his breast, felt the blade as it came down, guided it outward, caught it by a sudden turn, and scoring the huge hand deeply, twisted the weapon fairly out of Burk's grip.

At that moment he had the bully totally disarmed, and altogether at his mercy.

A shout went up from the men of Black Gorge. The stranger was, to a certain extent, their champion, though, had it turned out the other way, they would probably have been shouting just as loudly.

Billy Bird's nominal brother slipped his knife into its sheath, and, with folded

arms, stood facing the astonished Samson.

Burk hesitated for but a moment, while he gathered his wits and forces. With a snarl of rage he launched himself at the smiling sport, aiming one griping set of fingers at his throat, while with the other he sought to catch him by the breast.

The Apollo seemed to shake himself, and then send the whole weight of his body after his fist.

The blow sent Burk rolling over and over, and though he scrambled to his feet again, he held his head lower, gazing around him in a dazed, uncertain way.

This time it was the stranger sport who opened the attack. Wicked as a wildcat he sprang inside Burk's pretense of guard, canted him over his hip, and then, rising, with a wonderful effort, threw the giant clean over his head—a most amazing performance!

Burk went sailing through the air, and never stopped until he had landed in a heap behind the bar, his head doubled under him and his heels in the air.

"That much was all pure fun!" shouted the sport. "The rest to come is business of the pure quill variety. Move hand or foot against me or my friends and I'll drill you through and through! Billy, guard my rear!"

As he spoke the splendid athlete was leaning over the counter, pistol in hand, watching keenly the giant, who had begun to struggle.

"Rah fur Sugar Sam, an' that's him!" shouted Billy, pointing at the sport the instant he had leaped upon the bar.

"You hearn what he sed—that big brother ov mine? I'm doin' ov it, an' thar don't want none ov you ter furgit it. Burk ain't dead yit, an' ef yer waits a minnit you'll know ef he's cracked a bone."

The big cowhide boots disappeared, and shortly afterward the face of Burk rose above the level of the bar.

"Pard, I ain't on it half ez much ez I war', an' ef you'll play quit I'll say I'm done. I ain't ther kind ter go bu'st 'cause I won't know when I've got ernough. What'll you an' me take ter drink, an' leave all ther rest out ov that deal? After we git through, ov course it goes up all around fur ther house—an' ef thar's ary party thar ez don't want ter drink with a man ez hez b'in squarly downed he needn't."

He held out his hand as he finished speaking, and without hesitation the sport took it. He understood that, unless something came up between them to be a new cause of war, Burk would be true to his word.

"All right, Burk. I guess you and I can live in the same camp, and I don't mind sampling Sloan's hardware at your expense. After that I must leave you for the present. I was just on my way home when your coming stopped me."

The two touched glasses and drank together. Then the Apollo in velvet gave a beckon to Billy, a nod to all around, and went out into the night.

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. BIRD'S VISITOR.

It was early in the evening, according to the notions of time held by the sports at the Arcade, but Billy Bird and his friend went straight home. Billy had some judgment about such things, and though they were both wide enough awake, he knew that after the ride of the day and the labors of the evening rest and sleep would be grateful to the sport if he could be induced to take them.

"Well, old man," asked the latter, as they strolled away, "do you think I'll fill the bill, or do you want to turn me adrift? Not such a big thing as it might have been if I had felt that I had a streak of

real hog luck; but still, four hundred of an evening is not a half bad thing. If I could keep that up for a month or so, you'd be a little Croesus on wheels, and could buy a mine, or go to 'Frisco."

"What yer talkin' about? Don't see where I'm in. You played yer own game, and I reckon are spry enough ter hold on to yere own scads."

"Come, Billy. You put up the coin, and I didn't make any agreement about any percentage. The chips are yours, and I reckon you can get your money out of them if Sloan don't go broke to-night. It was all in the day's work; and so was the rustle with that overgrown extract of blow and bones. But if you hadn't wanted it I don't think I would have bothered with him to-night. It will just set the camp up to find me something hard, and so interfere with business. The next fellow will be thinking he can shoot, and when you have that kind of thing on board you sometimes meet with an accident, and hit to hurt."

"Thar's lots ov that kind thet would be a heap sight better fur jest some sich misshunary work; but let her go at that. I'm more afeared ov the'r sendin' in a dead center frum behind."

"I'll risk it on Burk. He's not that kind. I've used him up at his best, and there's no danger of his trying it again."

"That's so. He's squar', ef he does train with a bad gang. He wouldn't hev' kim ter-night ef he hedn't b'in started; but who started him, an' how kin yer make it out thet you war' ther meat he war' arter?"

"Give it up, Billy. We'll know when the time comes. Let's go to bed."

"Bed goes. But, sport, yer does take ther cake. You don't seem ter keer fur nothin'."

"That's a fact. Probably as much for you as for anything. We make an odd pair, but I think it's a good one to draw to."

The two went into the house, after looking after the horses, and in a few minutes both were asleep.

By and by the sport awoke with a start. It seemed as though hours had elapsed, and he was uncertain whether it was morning or if he had been aroused by some sound that was unexpected, though he had an idea that he had heard a single rap.

"Lay low, an' keep dark. Mebbe et's a visiter, an' mebbe it's ther speerits. They're both so thick round this shanty you can't tell t'other from which."

Mrs. Bird was evidently awake also. They heard her turn and mutter something.

Then there came a perfect hail of sharp raps, sounding as though given on the table in the adjoining room, where the old lady slept.

"Come in!" croaked Mrs. Bird, and the two heard the opening and closing of the outer door.

"I could not come sooner," said a voice, which the sport recognized with some surprise as belonging to Miss Arbelle, of the Arcade.

"Do you think they will have anything more to say to-night?"

"Yes, dearie. I asked them after I heard you at the door, and they said they had much; but I am not sure—I am not sure. The conditions are bad; and my two sons are in the next room. They will hear it all."

Mrs. Bird did not speak like the same woman who had greeted the sport on his arrival, though the tone of voice was about the same. Whether it was because she was under the "influence," or because at that time she was, after a fashion, playing a part, was not apparent.

The voice was, nevertheless, about the

same, and the young man had no difficulty in recognizing it. He listened with some interest to hear what answer would be given. Listeners never hear any good of themselves, is an old saying, but he knew that Miss Ila had been warned, so that she might reasonably be expected to speak for his ear.

"Old lady," she answered, "it is useless for you to attempt to palm the man off on me as your son. He is the same the spir-its spoke to me of this morning. I recognized him this night when he came into the Arcade, and it was partly in the hope of meeting him that I came here. They said he was to help me, and told how it happened that he came this way, or, rather, would come. If it prove that the truth was told in that, I can believe the rest."

"Ask him, then. I know nothing of him. Billy told me that he was his brother, and I asked nothing further. Billy is a good boy, and I care not to doubt his word."

Mrs. Bird had lain down without removing her clothes, and the lamp was burning dimly. She moved to the table and raised the wick. Then she knocked faintly at the door of the other room.

"Be with you in a minute!" responded the voice of the sport.

In a few minutes he came out, and bowed low but silently to the lady dealer of the Arcade.

She looked at him keenly as she spoke:

"To-night you took up my quarrel with that drunken fool, and I thank you for it; yet, I would rather you had waited. I can care for myself in the presence of a crowd, and you may have made more than one dangerous enemy by interfering."

"Fresh, as usual, probably; but I chipped on general principles. Saves your own chances for the next time. Burk himself will be all right, unless I am mistaken in the measure I took of the man. And, as for the rest, I can't see how I trod on any of their toes. Surely, Sloan won't be kicking over the little clean-up I made to-night?"

"No. Sloan will be more apt to act your friend, and Burk is not as bad as he looks, though he would have killed you this evening with the greatest pleasure. I would not have minded him myself, had it not been that others not of his class might have thought they had the same right. It was as well to take a firm stand, at the outset. Now, sir, it looks as though, without any intention of our own, that fate intended we should work together in some things, and be, after a fashion, friends. To make sure, will you tell me how you happened to come to Black Gorge?"

It was a question the man in velvet had been expecting, and without hesitation he told how, drifting along the trail, a chance encounter had turned him aside in this direction.

The particulars were the same as those already given, with some few additions, which added nothing to the strangeness of the story.

"It was all true, then. Mother Bird told me of it as it was happening, speaking from a trance, but I doubted. She said, too, that I was to tie to you, and that, pulling together, you would be the means of working out the problem I came here to Black Gorge to solve."

"So far as I am a free moral agent I am at your service, but I may as well say, at the outset, that I bartered myself away to Billy for a trial week of service, and if he needs me I do not know that I could draw out of it sooner. And Billy, who is shrewdness itself, is not inclined to put much confidence in the spirits when it is a matter of foretelling events. This evening he was positively disrespectful about the matter, and would have made

me blush if it hadn't been that he only confirmed my own experience."

"Yet, with such a proof in sight?"

"Oh, that is all very well, with something in hand to go on, but unless Mrs. Bird is a touch above the ordinary you will find her spirits can't make a much closer guess than we poor mortals. That by way of warning. As I told Billy to-day, I am dead broke, and loose at both ends. I'm ready to take hold of anything, and one thing is as good as another as long as there is bread, meat, and a spice of adventure in it. I'm not one of the kind that likes to handle a pick or till the soil for a living, but I can fall back on such things as those if nothing else offers."

"I will trust the spirits in this thing, and, surely, the contract with the boy must have been made by way of a joke. What employment could he give you?"

"There's a good deal of hard, solid business about a boy when he chooses to get down to it, and William has managed to keep me pretty well employed. The best thing you can do is to call him in. I left him sitting on the edge of the bed waiting for it."

It took no urging to induce William to enter. He came sliding in as though he had expected it all along, and gave a careless nod to Arbelle.

"Fix it ter suit yerself, pard, but you got ter take me inter ther circus. That's fur why I headed yer off. Ef not, we'll run our own clam wagon, an' let them toot ther horn on another route."

"I am not afraid to trust you at all," said Ila, looking over the boy with a thoughtful glance.

"I know that you are wise beyond your years, and have courage and skill at many things. I will want you to be silent on what you may hear, and take no steps that may reveal my objects or arouse suspicion. As I need you I will use you, and perhaps, before you get through, you will wish you had backed the other side! I suspect there will be the wealth and strength there—in the start, at least."

"Wouldn't give a cent ef it war'n't, an' ef I know brother Sammy, which I think I do, he feels about ther same way. Go ahead with yer pointers."

"Well," explained the girl; "I came here to find the proof of the death of my father, but I begin to believe he is not dead at all. The spirits say not, and though it may be as you say, and they do not always tell what to us seems exact truth, it seems strange that he could be dead and they not know it."

She turned to the sport and addressed her words to him. The two other listeners sat back with the air of persons who knew all about what was coming. Mrs. Bird had received this confidence before, while Billy had, in one way and another, picked up a good deal of information in the matter.

"So far as I can speak with certainty, the last real knowledge I have of him dates back a number of years, and he was then a partner of a man who, I believe, is living here now."

"According to all accounts they were not making a fortune then, but when I took up the trail it was natural that I should start at that place. There I learned that the two had left about the same time, but with this difference: Hiram Lane could be traced, but of my father, Hiram Wisdom, nothing could be heard from that day to this."

"Such cases occur. It is a chance if you ever hear of him again. Were I in your place I would give it up and wait on fate. It is the only great revealer."

The Apollo in velvet spoke soberly, even somberly, but his words had no effect.

"Fate will speak through me. At first, as I said, I believed he was dead. Since

then I have received vague hints, and have put them together. It may be that he is worse than dead, and that the man who was his partner could point to the spot where, still living, he is entombed. I have tried to make sure, but so far without success. I am going to make another and a desperate effort to unseal the mystery, and the spirits have said that you were to help me. If I understood aright they have also promised success."

"Much obliged to the spirits for suggesting my name; but don't you think you are running a great risk on their say-so?"

"No, not after what I this night saw, and what I have read of you. That woman you protected up at Fernandez! It was just a chance, some would say, that the paper describing it came into my hands, but when I saw it I thought you would be the man to help me."

"Ah! And with that to start on, you asked those same spirits where I was, and they answered that I was on the way. I understand better, now, though it is queer enough as it is. As a general thing they don't speak about strangers to everybody."

"But you are with me. If we win there will be justice done, and there will also be a fortune saved, and your reward will be worthy of your work."

"As Billy says. For the present he's the consulting member of the firm."

"An' Billy says yep, with a great, big Y."

"I supposed so, of course. And now, if it is not too soon in the game, would you mind telling me whom you think we will have to buck against?"

"I am coming to that. Judge Lane is at the head of the lot, and behind him are men of all grades, from Bowie Knife Burk down."

CHAPTER VII.

A SINGULAR POWER.

It was no new thing for the judge to pass an evening at home.

Since he got on what seemed to be the fair road for wealth, he was not so keen to pick up fortune at the table, and a tender-foot with a bulging wallet could stand a reasonable chance of getting through the town without being invited by Lane to sit down to a friendly game.

This evening he had not made his appearance at any of the saloons, nor had he been visible on the streets after the dispersal of the crowd which had gathered in the matter of the arrested horse-thieves.

Nevertheless, he had not been at his own home all the time, for exercises had already commenced at the Arcade when he came strolling casually into his house, and after a little promiscuous knocking about the house, seated himself by the well-lit table to read the newspaper which had come over that day in the stage.

On the other side of the table sat his niece, engaged with some fancy-work. Things looked very cosy in the little room, and the judge showed at his best.

He did not seem altogether at his ease, as the evening rolled on, however. Several times he got up and walked across the room; once he went to the door and, looking out, listened. If his niece, Edna, had been near enough to him she might have observed his ear was turned toward the Arcade.

No signs of promiscuous rioting rose on the night air, so Lane settled down to his paper again, and after that to a book, while Miss Edna dozed in a chair opposite to him. It was a little late for her, but this evening she had no inclination to retire. Later on, a cautious rap at the door did not cause her to open her eyes.

The visitor was a keen-eyed young fel-

low, rather neatly dressed, who was in the judge's employ. His name was Chet Taylor.

Lane looked up at him as he stood by the table.

"Well?"

"That's as you take it. It really might have been worse."

"You don't mean to say he got away with Burk?"

"That's what they call it down town, though there was no great harm done. Handled him like a child. Took his knife away, knocked him silly, and threw him over the bar."

"The deuce!"

"He is a corker, and that's a fact. After that they shook hands and the stranger went away laughing. The worst of it is that Bowie owns up and is willing to swear by the man in velvet."

"But did they have no quarrel? Nothing to stir up bad blood?"

"Nothing to amount to anything. He was the easiest man to pick a fight with you ever saw."

"And there was no one else had the sand to take a hand in?"

"Wasn't time for it. Besides, that little rat that calls him brother was watching from a corner with a derringer in each fist, and Bidwell Sloan and Arbelle had their sixes out, waiting for a chance to take a hand. They had the edge good, but we knew what they were going to do when the time came, so we passed, too."

A few questions from the judge brought out a full history of the affair, and he frowned as he said:

"It was understood that I only wanted the fellow's comb cut, so he could be laid off for repairs, but the next time the boys will have to go at him for good. Where is he now?"

"Down at Bird's, snoring the snore of the righteous. We trailed him there, and I listened at the window before I came over. Unless it is very important, it's bad medicine to tackle him there."

"Yes, yes. Some day there might be a suspicion aroused unless all the work is done openly and above board. There will be time enough when everything else fails. I'll see you about it to-morrow. Remember, I am trusting you clean through in this thing, but it goes no farther. Good-night."

Taylor went away well satisfied that his tidings had been taken so calmly. He knew more about Lane than most men—that he was an unpleasant man when in his white wrath.

The judge turned to Edna, and saw that between half-closed lids her eyes were gleaming on him.

"The real hard play has begun," he said, quietly. "I do not like to do it, but I think I had better send you on a little excursion. Perhaps this sport is snoring, and perhaps he is dreaming, but I want to see how he takes it, if he isn't. That boy would worm an opinion worth hearing out of the angel Gabriel, if he was awake."

"As you choose," but to me it seems like a waste of power. Do what you will," and the girl leaned back in her chair and stared for a little while straight in the eyes of her vis-a-vis, who was, meantime, making certain passes in front of her face.

It was not the first time something of the kind had happened, so that it was but a brief time until the girl medium sank into a sleep far different from a natural one.

"Go to Mrs. Bird's cabin!" the man ordered. "Do you see him?"

"I see him."

"What is he doing?"

"Listening."

"Who to?"

"To a woman who is talking."

"Is the woman Mrs. Bird?"

"No, for she sits opposite, listening also. Her face is turned away from me, and I do not know her voice."

"What is she saying?"

It is not necessary to give the words of her answer. Parrotlike, she followed the conversation, repeating it as it fell from the lips of the speakers. The judge would have learned no more had he been in the cabin himself.

But by and by something occurred which was a puzzle, such as had never yet been met with.

In her vision Edna saw Mrs. Bird fall back in a trance, while the sport moved forward and took her hand.

From that instant the picture began to blur, while the voices faded away into a whisper which did not reach her ears.

Edna looked up wearily.

"It is no use. There is one there stronger, beyond whose thoughts I cannot go. Wake me up. While her trance lasts I can learn no more."

Lane made the necessary passes, and the magnetic sleep of the young woman was broken. He sat and looked at her while she rested, for the trance into which she had been thrown seemed to have exhausted her strength.

When she looked up inquiringly he began to narrate the things she had told him. To her they were altogether new.

"What do you think is the meaning of the cloud that came between you at the close?" he asked, with some appearance of anxiety.

"It means there is a will at work now as strong, or stronger, than yours, and that it suspects, or is prepared for any contingency. It is diamond cut diamond, and with such work on both sides there is no telling what sort of a mess we may expect. So far, you know, I have claimed that I drew a line around some things you know of, but it may be I cannot keep it up. In fact, we had better not talk at times when we know they are in session."

The judge looked thoughtful and answered nothing. The same idea had struck him. There were two sides to this singular power which nowadays is called hypnotism, and strange complications might indeed arise. After a little he took his hat and went out. It was not necessary that Edna should know what he had in view.

She was fully in his confidence, but there was something he had to think of, and he wanted to do it unbiased by the arguments, pro or con, of any one else.

He did not attempt to conceal his movements, and so it was not strange that he met a man who was tacking up and down in the neighborhood of the house, half inclined to see if the judge would admit a caller, and just as certain that it would be bad policy in his present frame of mind to make the effort.

The man was Burk, and he halted squarely in front of the judge.

"Say," he said, speaking in a tone that was low, but which showed considerable excitement, "that thing is off. He's a better man ner I be, an' we'll let et go at that."

"It don't strike me that way, though, and I'm going to hold you to your work. I heard the whole story, and from what they say you were just to full of benzine to down a fly."

"Drunk er sober he kin hold over me any day in ther year, an' I know et. Ther knife are my best holt, but if he could wax me out at that, whar' would I kin in at with ther shooter, w'ich he travels on? Ef you'd on'y see him pull them guns ov

hissen when he rolled me over ther bar you'd say ther same."

"Pah! What sort of a show will you have if the boys once think you've lost your sand? You can't stop! You've got to down him, one way if not another."

"Et can't be did, an' I'm throwin' up ther job," was doggedly responded.

The big bully understood all the judge meant to imply, but it was not enough to shake his resolution.

"No, but you are not!" persisted the judge, sternly, holding up his hand in a commanding way, which seemed to rivet the attention of the other. "If I can't trust you in this, I can't trust you at all, and it's time for you to retire."

"You know you kin! You-know-I—never throwed—off—on—yer," Burk began, earnestly, but hesitated as he went along, and finally spoke almost like a man in a dream. The movements of the judge evidently controlled him, mentally as well as physically.

"I know what I can do when I make up my mind, and I have done it now. Answer me! Will you finish the job as it was laid out for you?"

"It'll be as you say. When shall I do the work?"

"Now, if you can find your man. But be watchful! It is just as well that you should not be seen."

"And ef I can't find him now?"

"Wait and watch for him till you can."

"Jest ez you say, boss; jest ez you say!" the giant acquiesced.

"Remember that I will always be with you to see you do your duty. You cannot get away from me. Wherever you go I follow, and just as I say, so must you do. Go!"

The judge turned away, and retraced his steps to his home, looking warily around him to make sure he was not observed by any late prowler, while Big Burk, still under the influence of the spell, or whatever it was, headed straight for the cabin of Mother Bird.

He reached the front of the building just as the door opened to let out a line of light, and, looking up, he saw Ila Arabelle standing on the threshold, the stranger sport at her shoulder.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RETURN OF THE EXILES.

The judge seemed fated to have visitors this night. Hardly had he returned from the meeting with Burk, and once more seated himself at home, when there was a knock at the door.

Edna had retired during his absence, and as he had locked the door when he entered, he went to it himself. Burk might have followed in spite of his orders.

"You must excuse my late call," said a voice, which at first was not familiar to him. "I only reached here a short time ago, and might not have troubled you to-night had I not seen that you were awake and up."

"Who are you? It seems to me you are a stranger both to the camp and me."

"Never mind who I am; what I want is a little talk about a matter which may turn out greatly to your advantage. There's millions in sight."

"Come in, if you wish, but tread carefully if you don't want to be brought down on the wing. I have to look out for myself pretty sharply, and am taking no chances."

"Oh, I am as peaceable as a lamb, and you will think so too when you hear what I have to say."

The visitor slipped in and the judge closed the door, which he locked.

"So you don't recognize me?" asked the

stranger, turning so as to face Lane squarely.

"By Heavens! I believe you are one of the horse thieves, back again in spite of the warning! Steady as you are, or down you go!"

His pistol was out and covering the stranger before he was done speaking; but it did not seem to awaken any terror.

"I understand whom you mean by that, and it didn't require any great skill at guessing to hit the mark; but, so far as the horse thieves were concerned, there may have been two of them, but I'll swear there were not three. It looked to me like a game set up to get an uncomfortable visitor out of the way, though how you knew I was coming, or anything about me, is more than I can understand."

"The camp thought it knew enough to give you a hemp necktie, and I showed my ignorance by speaking a word for you, and saving your neck. I suppose I will have the work to do myself. If you have any confederates within hearing you will be dead before they can reach you, if I see a single move to harm me."

"Oh, come, judge. You are hardly the coward you want to make out, and you didn't believe a word of what was said there in front of the saloon. I am an uncomfortable man to have around, and you would be willing to take a little risk to be rid of me. If you are Hiram Lane, I am your nephew, and if you are Hiram Wisdom, where is my uncle?"

"You said something of the kind this afternoon, but I believe it was as a scheme to account for your presence here. What have I to do with your folly? It will not protect you, and I warn you to leave the town faster than you entered it. It is not too late for the court of Judge Lynch to reorganize, and at this time of night you can be sure they would show no mercy."

The visitor threw himself carelessly into a chair.

"See here! I'll go you a deal shake on this thing. You have the dice all loaded, and can shoot seven or eleven just as it pleases your royal nibs, while I'm down almost on my uppers, and would stand a mighty poor show against you. I've got a proposition to make."

"I'll hear you out, for the sake of peace and quiet. Then I must insist on your leaving my house; and I tell you I will not interfere again, even if I see the boys have the rope 'round your neck."

"Oh, I have played bluff myself, more than once, and I know the game when I see it. I was bound to have a good look at you, and from what I have seen I can swear you are not Hi Lane, and I really believe you are his old side pard, Hi Wisdom."

"You can swear, eh? How?"

"Don't you wish you knew?" answered the young man, with a wink.

"Go on, then. It is all part of the same story."

"There's a little fortune coming to Hi Lane, and another one like it to his unworthy nephew, only I daren't make my appearance for fear of a little past nonsense which might land me in the state prison. Still, I can give you a heap of influence to bolster your claim, and all I want in return is my half, which you can collect for me."

"Why, you jailbird, you! Out of your own mouth you are convicted. If there was truth in what you say, you would use me as a cat's-paw to pull out of the coals for you the fortune you could not reach! The boy you are playing to represent died years ago, and it is useless for you to try to palm yourself off on me, or the world, as the original article. I

know your game now, and it will require no effort on my part to checkmate it. Begone!"

"All right, captain! I think we understand each other; and as long as I live you'll not play a winning hand. Nor will I be hung for a horse thief. So long!"

Just one thing protected the young man at that moment.

It was a little thing, but for the instant it seemed like a great one. He had said that afternoon, in the presence of the people of Black Gorge, that he was the judge's nephew. If his corpse was found there the time might some day come when his slayer would be called to account for it in a way the judge did not care to contemplate. He looked sullenly at the young man as he swaggered carelessly to the door and took his departure.

"It is Allen Lane, without a doubt!" muttered the judge, as he listened to his receding footsteps.

Then they suddenly ceased to sound, and, an instant later, there was the sound of a pistol shot, and a low moan.

After that, a hush!

He could guess that something had happened to Allen Lane, and right at his door! He did not know whether to be glad or sorry, and feared to go out to investigate, lest he might be tangled in something which would work to his harm.

He listened a little, and then hastily made his way to the rear door, and so around to the corner of the house.

Two men, a little distance away, were bending over a dark form, which the judge knew was a human body.

They seemed to be rifling the pockets, which were not turning out any great quantity of plunder.

"Et's ther galoot, sure ernuff, but I war' mighty much afeared we'd made a mistake when he drawed so blame quick. Ef he hadn't got it solid he'd hev' tried his iron; an' I reckon he could 'a' made et count."

"Dry up on that. He's not doin' much shootin' now, an' that's wot we're keerin' fur. What'll we be doin' with ther stiff?"

The judge recognized both voices, and hesitated no longer, but stepped forward, though with caution.

"Better slump it into the Red Branch, and say nothing about it. I'll try and keep my peace; but you don't want any of the town people getting a glimpse of you. They meant what they said this afternoon."

His answer to the question was wholly unexpected, but their ears were as sharp as his had been.

"Ez you say, boss. But et was kinder lucky we war' hyar ter ax fur a line ov interduckshun to them yer knows ov. You kinder furgot that, and when we war' scootin' out ov town it war' too late."

"The password is 'Cairo,'" answered Lane, in a low tone. "Now, off with you, and never speak of this again. I will see you to-morrow."

As he spoke he drew back hastily, and returned to the house by the route he had come. There was no need for him to run risks. These men had relieved him of an incubus of their own accord.

"Short an' sweet, but we might er done w'uss. Ef we kin make et 'thout strikin' a snag we'll douse him in ther branch; but you bet we don't kerry ther corps long ef we find they're goin' ter hurry ther mourners. Ketch hold!"

The worse-looking of the villains took hold of the body, and his partner did not hesitate. With the ghastly load between them they strode off toward the wooden structure which bridged the sullen stream

flowing between deep banks at the southern end of the town.

The sound of a pistol shot at any hour of the night in Black Gorge was not such a singular thing as to attract attention, and they pursued their way with plenty of confidence, especially as the route would not take them through the more thickly settled part of the town.

They reached the bridge without let or hindrance, and moved out to its very center.

There was a low railing at the sides, and on this they balanced their burden for a moment before dropping it; then it was pushed over and struck the water with a sullen splash.

The men went on over the bridge, but as they left the one end, Judge Lane stole away from the other. A desperate curiosity had caused him to follow and make sure of what was the disposition of the body.

CHAPTER IX.

BILLY TAKES THE TRAIL.

Big Burk looked up at the pair he could see in the doorway, and recognized his quarry.

Had he been thoroughly himself, he would have taken a steady aim and brought down the sport, for he was a certain shot with the pistol when he took his time.

But he was acting something like a man in a maze, who has been wandering around until, when he sees light ahead, it takes some time to know what it means.

The Apollo did not at first see him, and it was Miss Arbelle who caught a glimpse of the moonbeams glinting off the steel of a polished barrel, and, springing back, dropped her hand to her bosom.

Though she uttered no sound, the warning movement was not lost on the man at her shoulder, who stooped suddenly, and just in time.

There was a flash of light, and a bullet went crashing over his head.

The lead was so close to its mark that it cut through the crown of his hat, and barely missed creasing the skull.

Big Burk evidently thought he had done his work, as the victim stumbled to the floor, his arms spread out in front of him, his body motionless. Without the least haste or excitement he strode away, never noting that the hands stretched out toward him each held a weapon, and that the hammers were back and the tubes in dangerous line with himself.

Nevertheless, Miss Arbelle would have fired first had it not been for a warning hiss. She held her hand, and the sport arose to his feet, and, stepping carelessly out into the moonlight, gazed after the retreating figure with a puzzled look on his face.

"Something queer about it," he said.

"Not very. He came to get even."

"No; unless I am more mistaken in the man than I ought to be. He's a killer, but I don't believe he is an assassin."

"That may be your idea, but mine is that he has neither mercy nor honor in his composition."

The young man shook his head.

"Let it go at that. It seems you were the protector this time. My thanks, for he certainly meant it. Come on, though, for it is barely possible the sound of his revolver will awaken more snakes, and the sooner you are home the better."

"I am not afraid, but you might think it an insult if I asked you to let me go by myself."

She stepped down and joined him. Then the two walked silently away.

They saw nothing more of Burk, and the Apollo left Miss Arbelle at the door of her boarding place and strolled away.

He did not feel much like sleep, and yet it was rather late for a stranger to go on an exploring tour through the saloons which were holding their very hardest patronage at this hour of the night. He sauntered aimlessly around for a little, and was on his way to the cabin of Mrs. Bird, when he heard the pistol shot which brought Allen Lane down.

It created no excitement, and perhaps no one besides himself and those particularly interested noticed it at all.

It was not altogether curiosity which led him to walk in the direction of the sound, for he fancied Burk might be continuing his midnight merrymaking.

Instead, the man in velvet found something like a funeral, and dropped in at the tail end of the procession, keeping himself well in the shadows wherever it was possible. He did not recognize, then, the two men bearing the body, but he was sure of the judge, little as he had seen of him, and wanted to know what was his object.

As a result, when the judge left the bridge on the one side and the two villains on the other, the spy was hiding a little off the trail, and without delay slipped down to the water, though it was not the pleasantest kind of an undertaking.

"I'll try it for good luck, though it's ten chances to one there is nothing in it," he muttered.

"The poor wretch may not even be dead, and anyhow, I want to see who he is."

Luck favored the sport. The body had risen to the surface, and had been flung toward the shore by the water. He drew it out, and felt the heart with a curious sensation. Something in it, or about it, gave him the instant knowledge that the person was not dead. When he had managed to get him out of the gulch, up into the moonlight, and given a sharp look, he recognized the young man as being the individual who had claimed Lane as his uncle, and had shortly thereafter been banished.

"It's a pretty good backload to tote, but I guess I may as well take him around to Mother Bird. I don't suppose there will be any one but myself particularly interested in saving his life, and it might make trouble if I dropped him anywhere else. Here goes!"

The sport swung the senseless man on his back and stalked away.

The next day there was no hint upon the street that the exported wickedness of the Gorge had dared to return, and there was nothing unusual to be seen around Mother Bird's cabin. The man in velvet kept his own counsel.

The fact that he had a badly wounded stranger on his hands was enough to account for his not being seen on the streets much during the day, if the citizens had only known it, and he was just as well satisfied they were not aware of the fact.

Big Burk had disappeared, but there was nothing to remark in that, as he only came to town of evenings, and by no means regularly then. His headquarters were at the Rolling Thunder mine, where he managed things for Judge Lane, who was principal proprietor. It was supposed he had retired there after his failure of the night before, and the town was not altogether sorry.

Billy Bird and his pony were missing, but no one seemed to notice that.

Billy came and went as the spirit moved him, and there was only one thing certain about him. He was sure to turn up where there was fun going; and if any one made coin out of it, he was sure to get a share proportioned to his years, if not in excess.

The sport, who was getting the benefit of Billy's introduction by having to answer to the name of Sam Bird, was seen

once or twice, and was supposed to be exploring the town, but as the majority of the inhabitants were pursuing their daily avocations, not much attention was paid to him. He was hardly expected to be on hand before the evening amusements fairly opened.

It was pretty much the same way with the judge. If public opinion had been consulted, the answer would have been, he was moving about much as usual, and no one would have thought he had such secrets as those of the past night to hold locked in his breast.

There was one secret he did not know; but if he had heard of it he might have been uneasy.

When Big Burk fired the unavailing shot at the man in velvet, Billy pronounced himself as very much on hand, and slipping out of the window, executed a flank movement. He had Burk at his mercy, and if he had not had a cool head for a youngster would have brought him down.

When he noted the manner of the man he decided there was no hurry, and when he made sure his friend was unhurt, and was inclined to allow the giant to go about his business, Billy dropped quietly in behind the big slayer, having an idea that he would find out something, but what it might be he hardly knew.

As Burk's legs were long and Billy's short, the boy found he would have to move over the ground at what, for him, was a lively gait. He kept trotting along, however, and the result was, the chase took him out of the town and over the Red Branch. Big Burk was going straight out to the Rolling Thunder.

Billy sighed, but kept trotting on. He mentally said that as he had chipped into the game he was going to play the limit, and he had more in view than finding out why the giant had taken a felon shot at the Sport in Velvet.

He fancied he knew how far he had to go, and he was not mistaken. The Rolling Thunder was several miles from town, and the boy had passed it often in the course of his wanderings.

It was a place where visitors were not allowed, though as yet it was not noted for being a big strike. It was paying for itself, if reports were correct, but there was a big prospect ahead.

Burke strode on with his machine-like tread, and never halted when a voice challenged him. He said something which Billy did not exactly catch, and then went on into the cabin which stood at the mouth of the mine. It looked as though the chase had come to an unprofitable end.

The boy lingered, however. There might be something yet to come, and he was not mistaken.

By and by two men came along the trail from town, passing so near he could distinctly see them in the bright moonlight.

They halted cautiously enough at the first challenge, and this time Billy heard the word "Cairo."

Then they, too, passed on into the building.

"By ther holy hedge-hog! Et's ther two hoss thieves! What in guns an' powder be they doin' at ther Rollin' Thunder? This hyer child hez got ter find out!"

CHAPTER X.

THE SECRET OF THE SHAFT.

Billy Bird was not provisioned for a campaign, and he would have liked to have left word with his newly made friend as to where he was to be found, for he suspected there might be big danger prospecting for mysteries around the Rolling Thunder.

Still, he knew that to withdraw now might lose him the chance which he thought was open after a fashion. Most

of the men had gone to town with Big Burk, and probably had not yet returned. He thought it was possible to slip into the mine and hide, or at least find out if there was anything he ought to hear being said within the cabin.

He hardly knew which he wanted most to investigate. The very thought that visitors had been practically barred out of the Rolling Thunder made him believe there was something there which ought not remain hidden, and this was a chance he had been longing for. He stole forward on his hands and knees, and slipped into the rear of the sentinel. Once in the shadow of the cabin he was safe for the present.

By this time all was quiet within except for the heavy breathing of Big Burk, who was in a troubled sleep. There was a light burning, and, squinting through a crevice, Billy saw the two men crouching over a low fire on the hearth, pulling silently away at their pipes.

They remained so for some time, until one of them had emptied his pipe.

"Boss pays well," he growled, striking out the ashes.

"Fur that job, yes. But it war' a closter squeak fur our necks than I bargined fur."

"Squeak, nothin'. He stayed right by us, didn't he?"

"But he knows a heap; an' that bit ez ended at ther bridge war' beyond orders. Wonder what'll kin next?"

"Suthin' red, you kin bet, er he wouldn't want us out hyar."

"He's a keener. We got ter step soft er we'll git in er tangle."

"Ther noose ain't run yit fur my neck. I'll die a shoutin'."

"All ther same, look a leetle out. I don't trust him."

"You'd be a blamed fool ef yer did. You bet he ain't a trustin' us. Ef we got over his traces he'd shoot, an' explain to ther crowd arterwards."

"My idear, prezackly; an' ef it comes ter that I count on shootin' a trifle fust. But not ez long ez thar's good coin an' easy quarters a goin'."

"What yer s'pose he's got fur us out hyar?"

"Can't prove it by me. Mebbe ter mount that big galoot over thar."

"Don't keer, so et's s'uthin' easy. Better bunk in. Thar' seems ter be free beds an' I'm tired ter death."

The only person in the cabin with them was Big Burk, and he was evidently sleeping. Now and then their whispers were incautiously distinct, and Billy caught a good deal of the conversation. They turned in now, and, judging there was nothing more to be learned here, he stole away toward the mouth of the mine.

Being shrewd, and posted on such things, Billy knew where to look for a lantern, and found one without much difficulty. Soon he was threading a tunnel which led him deeply underground.

The lad had seen some little in his time and heard more about mines and mining, and as he went along he was more and more of the opinion that if the owner of the Rolling Thunder had found surface indications at the outset, there was every chance that it would end in a big strike.

A good deal of work had already been done—more than he had expected to find—and it did not look as though it had been done without some profit, either.

"Hillo!" he exclaimed, suddenly, and held his lantern, first down to look at the rocky floor, and then up to look at the side of the tunnel.

"'Pears ter be a chance fur a sorter flood, an' that door's ter shut ther water

out. Are it jest a spring, er kin thar' be a river thet's liable ter bust in some day?"

There was a framing of masonry let in the side wall of the tunnel, and a heavy door fitted into it, which appeared to be almost watertight; but under the edge the water had forced itself out, and was keeping the ground moist and sticky.

"Et's a door, sure ernough," he continued, examining the planking narrowly.

"Fur w'y, an' fur w'ich, an' fur whar'fore? Mebbly they want ter keep a spring handy ef they's ever berseeged in hyer, but it 'pears like a heap ov trouble on a blamed small chance. Jest ez well hev' walled her all up in cement, an' made a sure job. I'll look at that ag'in."

He hated to leave a mystery in his rear, but so far had found no hiding place, and he had not penetrated to the farthest recess. He went on in his search.

But half an hour later he came back. He had found nothing he would not have expected to find in any other mine from which the workmen were temporarily absent. He had not even found sure traces of the bonanza he was looking for. They seemed to be down to ore, but whether it was worth six dollars a ton, or sixty, was more than he could say. Only, there was no glistening mass, such as he thought of in his dreams, and it even seemed possible that the rock was barren altogether.

As he approached the neighborhood of the door in the wall he thought he heard the sound of a footstep, and immediately turned down his light and hid it under the breast of his coat.

There was no mistake about it.

Burk, the giant, was coming along the passage with a lantern in his hand, though Billy did not recognize him, nor did he see that the lantern was not lighted. Burk was moving along with the freedom of one who can see just where he is, and where to plant his feet. In front of the door he stopped, and a moment later the huge panel swung back, and a faint glow came out into the tunnel, as though the way had been opened to a room in which there was a low-burning light.

The light revealed for a moment the form of a man, though it was to be seen but dimly.

That gave the boy his direction and distances, and he hurried forward, dropping his feet like an Indian, swiftly, but noiselessly.

He was not surprised when the shadow and the light both vanished, but was delighted to find the door had not been completely closed. It struck him that the little ooze of water was purposely allowed for a blind, but he had no time to think about it. He pulled at the door, and it opened for a few inches, so that he could hear what was going on at the other side.

"What did yer say yer name war'?" asked the voice of Big Burk, though its tones sounded somewhat strangely to the boy.

"I—I—don—I—I—think it' is Hiram L—ane."

The words dropped out weakly, hesitatingly, and in an accent of terror.

"Don't know yer own name, eh? Reckon we kin teach it to yer afore yer gits out ov this. So that's it, are it? Reckon we'll hev' ter go ter disorplin'."

"No, no! For Heaven's sake! I'm mad; I know that, and sometimes I forget. That was a pard of mine. Wisdom is my name. Funny, ain't it? He, he! Hiram Wisdom—same in front, don't you see, only I was the sharp one, and that's that reason I'm going to be rich since Uncle John died."

"Wisdom—thet's more like it; but yer

pilin' on some ov that jimerack foolishness we don't want ter hear. Now, tell us s'uthin' 'bout that pard ov yourn, w'ich the same war' Hi Lane."

Then in the same weak, shuffling voice the prisoner, for such he undoubtedly was, began a strange, wandering story, but which had the element of truth in it somewhere, though now and then he mixed up the two men who figured in it after a singular fashion. Once or twice Big Burk corrected him, and then he went sailing off for a while, straight enough."

"Yer breakin' in better, an' yer beginnin' ter say it a heap better, but yer don't know et well enuff ter say et to the king. It'll hev' ter run smoother than that ter say it right loud. Ef yer wants ter git out ov this hole yer wants ter say et right off ther han'le, 'thout a hem er a haw. An' ef yer don't ther next time—look out! Thar's yer grub, though I 'most furgot et. Make et last tell I gits 'round ergin', an' it'll be tough times ef ary thing happens ter me."

Big Burk came to the door, and pushing it open, stepped out.

As he did so, Billy, without having premeditated it, slipped past him, crouching low. Then the door slammed to with a crash, and he knew he was locked in with a lunatic.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SPORT FROM BAD LUCK BAR.

Of course the judge was aware of the failure of Big Burk in his attempt on the sport.

He could see there had been a miss in the matter when the latter made his appearance on the street, and he would have liked to know the full particulars concerning what had happened, but did not care to exercise his powers in that direction just at present.

Big Burk, in his waking moments, would know nothing about it, and there were certain limits to the investigations which he should make through means of his singular power. That had to be somewhat reserved for special occasions.

Miss Edna, speaking simply as an everyday individual, had said frankly that she did not care to be tested too far about unimportant matters, and so the judge had to be satisfied with results as they appeared on the surface.

He was talking about it early in the evening, and had there been any one to overhear the conversation, it would have been thought he had a very worthy assistant. The young lady spoke on serious matters with as much coolness as Lane himself.

"The time has about come to get to work," he was saying.

"All the rest has been merely preliminary. I suspect we had better run the risk, and play the game with the cards we have in our hands. The idiot won't speak of the one thing we want him to speak about. We have tried force, threats, the power—everything. I tell you, I am half inclined to draw off Burk, and leave him to his own reflections. Curse him, he has been fully warned."

"Curse him as much as you please, if it will do you any good. But the fact remains that there are two or three points on which we need considerable enlightenment, and we have not been able to find out anything about them by fair means or foul. The mine—which promised to be such a bonanza, and which was the original motor in the game—seems to have been but a pocket, and the little lead, if there was any, has petered out. If you expect to work the game as we have laid it out it will have to be done soon. It is for you to say whether we shall take the chances."

"Yes—a thousand times, yes! And as for this stranger who, it has been revealed, is interested in it, and will stand in our way, he is only a mortal, and the third time will be the charm."

"Let us hope so. But he is dangerous if you have told me truly what I have said when under the spell. That he came at all is dangerous, and that he should win against odds is worse still. If he was looking for Hiram Lane why did he not apply at once to you?"

"Tell me something of his reasons, if you can," answered Lane, with a shrug of his shoulders. "That is what has been troubling me, and I suspect will have more or less to do with his early retirement from labor at Black Gorge. Perhaps, though, I can find out. If I can I will let you know. Hold yourself ready for an early move, and if we fail, why, it was a stake worth playing for."

The judge went out without waiting for an answer. He was apparently as cool as ever, and yet he had the fear on him which at one time or another comes to the lawbreaker. He had gone on, and on, and on, until now there seemed to be no end to the work before him.

Down at the Arcade things were well under way when he stepped in. He came and went there as it suited him, and Bidwell Sloan, if not a friend, had been sometimes an ally. A dozen men were there who had known him for a long time, and though they were not hankering for a game with him, they did not object to an occasional effort at draw, with a moderate limit. But they had to be pretty well warmed up before they would sit down to make a night of it with him. They knew his strength at the game too well.

Abe Brandon was one of them.

He had a half-interest in a claim which had made him a living from the day he first struck pay rock, and which he hoped some day to sell for a little fortune when capital came that way. Meanwhile, he was looked at as one of the solid men of the town.

"Just the man I wanted to see," said Brandon, as the judge approached the bar, where he was standing.

"There's a new sport in town, and we want to stake you, and set you at him. He won a tidy little pile off of Bidwell's table last night, and the boys will die if they don't get a chance to find out what his judgment is worth on an ace full."

"Oh, come, Abe. I'm getting too old for that sort of thing. I've about tied up on the pasteboards. You can't expect the proprietor of the Rolling Thunder to flip at the crack, or play penny poke with every hobo that runs up a shoestring on Sloan. That will do with the boys, for the sake of old times, but I'm not roping in the stranger who sits down within our gates. It wouldn't look bon ton."

"Shucks! Five hundred of a stranger's money is as good for you as five hundred of mine, and that was just what it cost me the last night we went in for swelled heads together. Besides, for the honor of the Rolling Thunder, you ought to try him a whirl of some kind. He just wound up that big foreman of yours in so tight a knot it looked as though he would never get untangled."

"If Burk is fool enough to monkey with one of the Bird family, he deserves what he gets. Billy is an elephant on tin wheels—what did he think his big brother was going to pan out?"

"That's so!" laughed Abe.

"The boy is a holy terror, and I wouldn't wonder if this same brother, at his age, could have given a chap of his size one or two in the game and come out jaybird. All right. If you won't I don't know but what I'll have to tackle him my-

self. I was looking for him, but he hasn't shown up. From what they say I don't think he's hard to get acquainted with."

"Oh, if you're going for him I wouldn't mind looking over your shoulder and telling you what to play."

"Nixey! I put up my own coin and guess on the worth of my own hand. I won't lose any more, and may make a dollar or two when I pocket the whole of the stakes. See?"

"Steady on that!" warned Sloan.

"There he is now."

The Sport in Velvet came gliding into the room, as he came taking a quick inventory.

He seemed to search out Lane first of all, and in some occult way understood he had been talking about him.

That did not trouble him a particle, and he was ready for whatever might come. Perhaps he would sooner have seen Burk there, because he began to connect him with the disappearance of the boy, and it was really he for whom he was looking.

He made his way to the bar, and nodded to Sloan, who still stood behind it, and the result was an introduction to both the judge and Abe Brandon.

"One of our principal men," added Sloan, "who sometimes condescends to enlighten us poor mortals as to how to lay poker. If you have any yearnings for high art in that direction, you couldn't strike a better man to give you a lesson."

"Glad to meet him," answered the sport, coolly; "but if there are any lessons going in that line I generally expect to give them myself. Fact is, I have about gone out of the business in disgust. But with a chief, or two or three chiefs, for that matter, I don't mind taking a hand. There is always some fun then, and sometimes a little profit."

The challenge was so open the judge could not have slighted it if he had chosen, and the fact was, he didn't want to. It had been part of his idea to have the stranger drop into just such a bit of amusement, while seemingly anxious to avoid it. Sloan moved around from behind the bar, and the four sat down.

As they threw around for deal they became aware of a fifth individual standing at the table, a natty-looking young fellow apparently but little more than a boy in years.

To the judge the appearance seemed unwelcome, but Abe hailed him with pleasure.

"Hi, Chris! Around again? How are things over at the Bar? You are just in time to make a fifth wheel, and that's a mighty important thing for easy going, in spite of the books. Pull in."

The young fellow smiled, and sat down on the chair which happened to be vacant.

"The Bar is running on a full head of steam, but the boys begin to fight shy of yours truly. Ace, as usual. My deal; what's the limit?"

He gathered up the cards and the game began, Abe barely taking time to give the young man a sort of introduction to the sport.

"Chris Matter, from Bad Luck Bar. He generally carries the luck of his camp in his pocket, and when he comes over here that whole city goes broke. He knows the cards by name, and don't you forget it."

The man in velvet nodded, but said little. He knew he was in a game where he could expect no mercy, and was not sure the whole four were not in a combination to beat him, with this young fellow brought in for some special purpose. He attended strictly to business, and played his cards as he got them, all the time on his guard, though seemingly as unconcerned as any of them.

Every one seemed very much at his ease, stakes were light, and nobody winning or

losing much, when the judge proposed a jackpot, and the sport opened with three kings.

CHAPTER XII.

CHRIS FROM BAD LUCK BAR.

"Five."

"Ten."

"Twenty."

"Forty."

"Make it good, throw in about ten more for a question, and wait to see what you are going to do about it."

"You can't win if you don't bet, and sometimes a bluff is better than a big hand. I'm out."

"The more money you put down the less you takes up, gents. I got you this time and so I won't crowd you. I'll just see that, even, and have the agony over."

Abe was inclined to be cautious, and though he held a good hand, he did not propose letting the game get away with him in the outset, or before he saw how luck was running. He placed his cards face down on the table, leaned back, and tried to look unconscious.

The Sport in Velvet knew all about the luck, and was simply playing his hand according to its value in proportion to the size of his capital, while the judge and the man from Bad Luck Bar were inclined to crowd up the stakes.

In the opinion of the frequenters of the Arcade, the judge would have been the dangerous man, but the sport decided in his own mind that Chris Matter was the one to watch.

He was certain that at all times he played a strong hand, or he would never be admitted to a deal with such high-flyers, and to-night it seemed more than likely that he came with a purpose.

Still, it had not been his deal, and, closely as the sport had watched his cards, it did not seem possible he was holding out. He met the raises with a promptness that argued complete confidence, going a trifle better each time, and it was only when he had nearly the whole of his capital on the board that the judge called.

The sport threw down four kings.

Promptly Chris Matter stacked the deck and discards together on the table, at the same time with the other hand whipping out a derringer.

"I'm not saying a blamed word except 'Count the cards.' There's something rotten somewhere."

"Rotten or sound, that's the size of my hand, and there don't any of you want to disremember," said the sport, slowly and calmly folding his arms, without a single motion which looked like drawing a weapon.

"The rest of you show up what you got for a starter. After that you can count up two or three decks if there is nothing in your cards that takes the money."

With his empty hand Matter turned over the cards which lay on the table before him, disclosing four queens.

The judge threw down an ace full.

"Your hand takes the money if it's a square deal, and it's you and Chris for that. I have nothing to say."

"Oh, count the cards, and tell us what it all means," answered the sport, with a careless smile.

"Sloan, as you are out of it, suppose you run them off."

Sloan looked serious.

He understood the judge better than most people, and thought he saw something dangerous behind it all.

Still, as he was sitting out of range, and had been called on for his help in what seemed to be a dangerous deadlock, he could not well refuse.

He gathered up the cards, and, first

counting up the cards in the hands as spread out on the table, ran over the rest, one at a time.

Around was almost the silence of death, for nothing could be heard but the faint flip, flip, of the cards, and the suppressed breathing of interested men. In some way the news had spread all over the saloon, and every face was turned toward the table where the five sat.

"Sorry to say it," said Sloan, with an anxious face.

"There's something wrong somewhere. There's only fifty cards here."

"Fifty!" exclaimed the young man from the Bar.

"Don't hurry!" retorted the Sport in Velvet.

"We both have the drop, and we may as well let the crowd know what it is all about."

He just wheeled himself a little in his seat, and there, from between his folded arms, came the muzzle of a derringer which had crept out of his sleeve.

"Now, where are the other two cards?"

"One of them is right in front of your chair, where you dropped it from under your knee," said Chris Matter, firmly, never wincing under the snarling muzzle of the sport's derringer which looked him in the face.

"That's all I can speak for, but I wouldn't be surprised if the other wasn't far off."

"Excuse me. I don't know anything about that one, but the other is the sixth card in your hand."

A flush actually came into the face of the young man, but he never looked down. There was no mistaking his surprise, but it might only be a trap to take him off his guard.

"Is that a true bill, Sloan?" he asked, meeting the burning gaze of the sport with a fierce stare.

Bidwell was as much surprised as any one, but he reached over and spread the cards of the young man farther apart.

There, nestling snugly beneath the last one which had heretofore been visible, was a wretched little deuce of diamonds.

"True it is, but the blamed little thing stuck like wax. You must have overlooked it when you skinned your hand."

"Or been too busy flipping that card under the table to see it," retorted the sport, in an amiable tone, which almost made one think he took the whole thing as a joke.

"But, being the biggest hand out, anyway, I guess four kings will take the money."

"Not by an infernal sight!" gritted Chris.

"This thing will have to be settled some other way, if we shoot for it."

"Shoot goes," answered the sport, just as cool.

"Let Bidwell throw around, and the first jack takes the money and the other man gets the shot."

"Anything to settle the question between us. After those two cards being where they were, we can't both draw breath in the Arcade long without one of us going down."

Sloan took up the deck. There were no interruptions from the outsiders, though they were craning their necks from a respectful distance to see what was going on. He was not certain but this was better than promiscuous shooting and the wrong man killed.

"Let me understand this. The first jack gives the money to the man it falls to, and he has the right to a shot across the table at the other."

"Not by a blamed sight. The first jack gives the money to the man. Then the other fellow can have the shot. If you

said at the length of the room it wouldn't look quite so much like murder."

Sloan glanced across at Matter.

"All right. The loser has a fair shot the length of the room. Let them whirl."

Bidwell ran the cards in from the ends, gave them a shuffle, and then commenced dealing, one card to Matter and the next to the sport.

"My stakes!" exclaimed the sport, as, after some half dozen cards had come his way the first jack made its appearance, staring him in the face, and he swept into his pocket the money from the table.

"And my shot," retorted Matter, deadly cool, and slowly rising from his seat.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHRIS MATTER GETS HIS SHOT.

"A fellow would risk two or three shots for a pile like that," yawned the sport, slowly pushing back his chair.

"Some of you stick me up against the wall, about where he wants me. I wouldn't be afraid to give small odds that he don't hit me, anyhow."

"Don't you be too free to gamble on that point," said Sloan, speaking seriously.

"At that distance he can cut all the spots out of a six spot in just five seconds. And I wouldn't wonder if he could make better time if he was crowded a little. If he means shooting you had better be saying your prayers."

Sloan felt it his duty to give good advice, though in all the times he had been crowded into a corner, with odds against him and death staring him in the face, he had never been known to take it, when it came in such a shape. He raised his hand and gave a gesture.

The crowd fell apart, leaving a little lane to the wall at the farther end of the saloon.

Through this lane the sport walked, with a quick, cat-like, springy step, and, wheeling at the farther end, placed himself with his back against the wall.

He was a remarkably handsome fellow, and his well cut clothes showed off his splendid figure to perfect advantage. There were a few in the crowd of spectators who thought it a shame, but for the most part the lookers-on felt little pity in the excitement of the moment.

He was comparatively a stranger, and probably a convicted card sharp. Their sympathies would have been more with Chris Matter had fate decided that things should be the other way.

"Ready," he said, sharply, from the wall, and the young man from Bad Luck Bar took his position with a revolver in his hand.

"Keep cool," whispered the judge between his teeth.

"You have only the one fair shot, and I'm not sure the Gorge would stand another one that was foul."

"I'm as cool as an iceberg, and I know just how he will look after I have pulled trigger."

"Sloan, give the word to fire."

"I'd sooner not, but when two gentlemen have a difference of opinion about cards, I don't know as there is any way to prevent their settling it."

"One!"

At that Matter threw his pistol hand a little forward and fixed his eyes on those of the sport. The room was a long one, but something he saw fixed them there. It seemed as though he caught a glint of fire, flashing clear across the intervening distance. The judge noted a change come over his face, but it was too late to speak again. Sloan kept on with his counting:

"Two!"

"Three! Fire!"

The hand of the Sport in Velvet was rising. The index finger pointed straight

at the young man from the Bar. The posture of the whole man was one of command.

Matter had one evening, during one of his visits to the Gorge, given in that very room a specimen of his skill with the pistol, and every one knew he could place his bullets where he called them. The action of the sport was not one he could object to, nor did it seem to unnerve him, for the instant he stood with his muzzle covering the heart of the other.

Then his whole frame suddenly appeared to grow rigid, save that his hand rose somewhat before he pulled the trigger.

The bullet pierced the wall not an inch above the head of the sport, who smiled, nodded to all, and made a gesture as though he was brushing something away from in front of him.

"Foul play!" shouted the judge, springing forward, while Chris reeled back, as though unnerved by the reaction.

"Your infernal mesmerism destroyed the aim. It was no fair shot."

"So that was what was the matter. You saw me throw around for my life against the stakes because you thought your side pard was going to get the pile some way, and would make a divvy afterwards. Then was the time for you to kick. If Mr. Brandon and Sloan aren't satisfied, I'll give them back their antes, but for the rest, you bet they are salted down, and it takes a man to get them."

The sport was as ready as the judge, had not Chris Matter come between them.

He was pale from excitement, or something else, and totally unlike the jaunty little fellow of an hour before.

"Go slow, judge; this is my fight, and you don't want to chip in too soon. Perhaps it's not ended yet. I've had a shot at the sport; maybe he thinks he ought to have one at me. If he does, I don't know but what he's right. Set them up on the other alley, Bidwell, and see if he can't show a better tally sheet."

He straightened himself up, and grew more firm as he looked at the man in velvet. Whatever might have affected him, it was hardly fear.

"I admire your nerve," responded the sport; "and I don't doubt you'd do the square thing if I said the word; but I reckon this thing has gone almost far enough. I am satisfied, if you are."

He looked around, and it almost seemed as though he could read disappointment on some of the faces there.

"If I can help you out of the hole, say the word. Chris Matter won't spoil poker sport, even if it does give him the hot end of the poker."

"Thanks. I might have known it. I think I have the range all right, and if you will just accommodate me—have you such a thing as a quarter?"

Chris produced the coin and held it up.

"I'm not insisting, but if you would put that between your lips, and stand where I did, with your cheek to the wall, I think I could demonstrate that I know my business, even if I don't care to crowd matters too hard when the other fellow is willing."

Without a word the young man from Bad Luck Bar placed the silver piece between his lips and moved to the spot which the sport had lately vacated.

The light from a bracket lamp with a polished reflector brought out every line in his face as he turned toward it; and one thing was certain. He showed no signs of uneasiness or fear.

Once more Lane sought to interfere, though it was hard to tell whether or not he was desperately in earnest.

This time Bidwell Sloan spoke.

"Go slow, Hi. One act at a time. The circus ain't out yet, and your turn may come after a while. If you interfere now

I'll do my little best to drop you myself. The youngster was too fresh, and he deserves to learn. There is none of it very good poker-play, but it's mighty interesting as a lesson in nerve."

When Sloan talked that way he meant it, and generally had a few friends who were of the same way of thinking. There was no more effort at interference.

The sport took his position.

"You gave the word a bit ago; suppose you try it some more. It's not much of a show! I'm giving you, but it will do till there's a chance outdoors."

"Ready!" responded the proprietor of the Arcade.

"One, two, three! Fire!"

There was no dwelling on the numbers, and at the order "Ready!" the sport turned his back squarely on Matter.

At the word "Fire!" he spun completely around on his heel, hardly pausing an instant, if at all, as he threw up his hand toward Chris Matter, and fired. Before the smoke had drifted half-way down the room, he had made a revolution and a half, and was coming toward the crowd, while a chorus of shouts and the noise of the clapping of hands arose through the building.

His ball had hit the coin squarely on the edge, and knocked it from between the lips which were loosely holding it, without damage or hurt.

Chris came forward, a great deal less excited than after his own fruitless shot.

"You did it well, stranger, and I guess you are half white. We'll let it go at that for this time. This don't seem to be my night on, and I reckon they're wanting me at the Bar. So long; and I'm not sure I'll see you all later. Reckon, from this time on, I'll be below par at Black Gorge, and you bet I'll think twice before I wring into another game of draw when there's a card lying on the floor."

He swung himself away, and though more than one tried to stop him, it was no use.

"And now, judge, the age has got around to you at last. What are you going to do about it? Speak quick, and don't keep the procession waiting. If you mean sporting, down with the dust."

If the chief of the camp was looking for business, the stranger sport was bound that he should have it.

CHAPTER XIV.

FOUR MEN DOWN.

For once Judge Lane, in the presence of all the citizens of Black Gorge who happened to be there assembled, took water.

"Excuse me, young man, but in such things one can't well go back of the referee, and that book appears to be closed. If you are satisfied, I've nothing to say, and will jump the game."

"That's right. I don't think we would have a very comfortable time. I don't kick because you spoke up for your young pard, and I don't crowd for sheer fun. Gents, join me. The bar is free till you've all had a taste of the best Brother Bidwell has in the house."

The invitation did not make him any the less popular, and there were few who did not take advantage of it. For a few minutes the Arcade did a land office business at the bar.

The judge was one of those who held back.

It was not probable, after what had just been said, that it would lead to trouble, but it seemed more like an armed neutrality than a peace between Lane and the Sport in Velvet. Something more might come later on. As for the sport, when he had settled his bill, he went along with the crowd which rolled back to the gambling room. He did not care

to test the strength of the dealer that evening, but he wanted, if possible, to get a word to her.

As he came to the table, Miss Arbelle looked up and caught his eye.

When she had been left almost alone by those who went out into the other room where the game of poker and the shooting had been going on, she had retained her seat. She knew she had a way of chipping into a game that did not seem to be running just right, and suspected that if she went with the rest she would become entangled in an affair which no doubt the sport was able to manage.

It was true the judge had plenty of friends there, but the men from the Rolling Thunder had not yet put in an appearance; the night was not so far advanced, nor had the drinking been so deep that the sport should look in vain for fair play.

As she looked at the sport, her lips fashioned no words, but her eyes said something.

They told him to beware, and left him to guess the rest.

He knew there was trouble afloat, but he could not guess in what shape it would come. There was nothing to do but to keep a sharp watch on the judge and be ready generally for anything else which might turn up.

The game opened once more, and Miss Arbelle drew the cards without giving any farther sign of the thoughts which agitated her mind. She was not anxious that anything should happen to Judge Lane; not, at least, until she had probed the mystery which she had set out to solve, while still less did she want the sport killed in the affair into which her influence had more or less to do with drawing him.

Several men who were cappers for the game began to bet cautiously, with an eye to starting the ball to rolling, and one or two outsiders ventured a few chips, but things were not in shape to boom at once. The late affair had stirred up the men, and the game was not presenting its usual attractions.

"No use asking you to buy a few checks; you have a pocketful already," said the fair dealer, looking up.

"But, if you can't see that this beats mining two to one, and lays all over short cards, I'm sorry for your eyesight. Hit them hard, or hit them gently, but hit them some way, for there is just going to be a boom in luck. I can feel it in my fingers."

"But those fingers don't say whom the boom is going to be for, and it's more than likely it will be for the house," retorted the Apollo in velvet, as he smilingly threw down a few chips on the queen.

"We'll see how her royal majesty winks to-night."

He had an idea Miss Arbelle merely wanted to engage his attention, and was willing to gratify her. The cards were slipping out just fast enough to keep up a semblance of interest in the game, and when Sloan glanced in through the arch he shook his head. It did not look as though a fortune was to be made for the house, and he had half a notion to call off the dealer and shut the bank for the night.

The queen split, and the sport looked serious.

"Kind of betwixt and between," he muttered, "with the advantage a little in favor of the bank. It's a sign to keep eyes open and go slow."

While the game dragged along the sport heard, several times, snatches of conversation which were not meant for his ears, and which might have put him on his guard, had he needed the hint.

"Say? D'yer think Chris took water fur good an' all? Looked like ther sport could shoot all round him; but who's ter

tell? He's a leetle dandy when he starts in ter lift h'ar."

"Yer shoutin'. He don't kim over often, but when he does he allers kin make ther fur fly ef they brissel up to him; and ef yer notise, ther jedge allers stan's 'round ez though he war' backin' his game. Hez he r'ally left town?"

"Can't prove et by me, but he's moved his mustang."

"Wouldn't wonder ef he kim back ter git one more shot when his han' gits stiddy."

"That's what."

"An' ther sport don't seem ter keer."

The Sport in Velvet did care, but just then he was more interested in something he was watching in the game.

He had believed Miss Arbelle enough his friend to give him a square deal, but just now the cards were running very strange, and he had caught a quick glimpse of a movement of her fingers which looked, to say the least, slightly suspicious.

He leaned toward the table, his attention riveted on the box, and at that moment a gang of men came tumbling through the doorway, with Chris Matter in the lead.

The young fellow looked very different from what he did when he went away, and seemed to have recovered all his careless courage, and something more. Behind him came Big Burk and two strangers, together with several men from the mine.

"Turn around, sport, and test it over! Chris Matter is a hard man to beat. I've tried it, but I can't stay down."

He held a revolver in his hand, but the muzzle was pointed downward, and scarcely to be seen as it hung by his side.

The Sport in Velvet wheeled at the voice, his hand flying to his hip as he shouted:

"Go as you please, little one, and fire as the hat drops. Ah!"

It was a snap shot such as you read about, taken the instant he faced his challenger, and eye could scarce distinguish that he paused for aim—and then followed, just a trifle later, a loud report, that sounded as single, but which was made from three distinct shots.

The Apollo in velvet dropped face downward, with outstretched hands, as though he was a leaden image flung from its pedestal by a sudden shock of an earthquake; but three others fell with him, or, perhaps, a trifle later.

Hi Lane had been standing a little distance behind. At the challenge of Chris he had thrown up his own hand, and taken aim with his revolver at the back of the head of the man in velvet, while, at the same time, Big Burk, away on the other side, but directly facing him, was waiting the word to try a shot once more himself.

While the sport was dropping away from between them their fingers tightened, and before the last sound died out or the waves of smoke fairly settled down on them, the four were lying on the floor.

CHAPTER XV.

DANDY DAVIDS, THE DETECTIVE.

Three lay where they fell, but the fourth leaped up. Almost instantly the sport was on his feet again.

"Steady, all!" he shouted. "There's only one barrel of my gun empty so far, and that creased Chris Matter. The rest of it was done among themselves. If there is any life left in the judge I want him."

And, taking a step forward, with both hands out, each holding a pistol, he

caught the drop on the two strangers who had come with Chris and Big Burk.

"Hold them there, some of you! They can't fix up so I won't know them, and they are the two horse thieves you ran out of town yesterday. They tried their hands at murder last night, and when we see how their work turns out there may be a necktie social in if for them!"

"And who are you?" demanded Bidwell Sloan, covering them promptly as he entered from the saloon with the weapons in his hands. "You talk as though you spoke by card, but you've done the work here of a dozen."

"I'm Dandy Davids, the Red Hot Detective. I'm here on the trail of Hi Wisdom, and if I'm not mistaken they've left me only his corpus."

A cry went up from Miss Arbelle, who darted to the judge before even the swift strides of the unmasked detective could take him there.

She snatched his head up in her arms as he lay there, motionless on the floor, and looked down into the pale face with a long, eager stare. This was different from anything she had suspected; or was the sport detective altogether mistaken?

Then she pushed away the collar around the neck of the dying man and smoothed out the skin there as though searching for a scar.

She found it, too!

"My father!" she exclaimed, half in horror, half in grief.

The sport interrupted. He saw the closed eyes opening under the call, but he knew what the dun, gray shadow meant, which was stealing over the judge's face.

"One word, first. There is no time to waste, and there may be a life at stake. Wisdom, what have you done with Lane himself?"

At that name whispered into his ear the dying man partially roused.

"Is he living?" continued Davids.

The judge spoke with much of an effort, in a husky whisper.

"Yes!"

"Where is he? Speak! You must speak!"

The sport detective stared down on him with the same look he had turned on Chris Matter when he spoiled his shot.

"Burk—can—tell you! No one else knows!"

"Look out!" shouted some one. "Hyer kims Chris!"

The young man from the Bar was coming, but not after a fashion to do much damage.

His hands were empty, and held out almost blindly, while he staggered forward, to pitch himself down by the side of the judge, pushing Ha Arbelle away as he dropped.

"Great Scott! Et's a woman!" ejaculated a bystander.

"Yes; it's the girl who passes as his niece. I found it out at the last minute. If I had not known, my lead would have bitten harder."

Davids spoke hastily, to smooth the way a trifle.

"Not his niece—his wife!" said the disguised woman, unsteadily, and then her whole attention was centered on the dying man, who was going fast.

The sport detective, seeing there was nothing more to be learned there, turned toward Big Burk.

He had in some way a friendly feeling for the giant, who, he believed, acted contrary to his true nature because he was driven by a power he did not understand and which he could not resist.

The lead of the judge had done swift, sure work. There was nothing more to

be learned from him, for the man was dead.

It was an ugly little snarl, and not at all the way Dandy Davids would have liked to see.

Yet he had not been nursing Allen Lane that day for nothing, and he could but admit that perhaps things might have gone worse.

As for the two run-out horse thieves, they held their peace, recognizing the fact that they were in no end of danger, and cursing their stupidity for not beating a retreat under cover of the smoke. Their presence there was of itself a small matter, but the accusation of murder fell on frightened ears.

They cowered back as the sharp eyes of the detective ran them over, and then gave a simultaneous shout of horror, thinking for a moment they saw a ghost.

Allen Lane, patched and bandaged, but very much alive, was standing before them, shaking a finger in their faces!

They recognized the truth, however, without long delay, and the leading spirit of the two bristled up.

"Say! Ef three horse thieves thet hez hed full pardon fall out 'mong the'r selves, an' hev' a leetle scrap, that ain't no hang-in' matter; and fur this racket hyer, we ain't did a blessed thing."

"A little hickory oil would do them good, and might loosen their tongues a bit, for they may know something about Hiram Lane, the man for whom I am searching."

The sport did not care to be burdened with the men, and it was possible if the town was not directed in another course there might be a hanging to emphasize the disgust at the return of the banished one. The suggestion was caught at, and a grinning crowd hustled the two out into the night. As they went along the sport detective shouted:

"While you are at it see if you can get anything out of them about Billy Bird. He has been missing since last night, and I begin to be afraid something has happened to him."

CHAPTER XVI.

DANDY DAVIDS'S ROUND-UP.

During the course of his not very long life Billy Bird had managed to get himself into all sorts of scrapes; but as regularly something turned up to get him out. So long as danger did not come too overwhelmingly close there was no danger he would lose his nerve, or be long kept down for want of freshness.

He was unpleasantly conscious that he had placed himself in a trap at the very moment he knew its jaws were about to close, and if he should be pinched hard he had no one to blame for it but himself.

He did not advance from the door, but remained peering around in the semi-darkness, which was hardly broken by the little light of the low-turned lamp. He was not frightened, but felt inclined to be very careful until he could see what manner of human being it was who shared the cell with him.

He heard the clink and clank of a chain, and felt a little more confident.

"It'd be blame o'kkard ter hev' ter shoot him," thought the boy; "an' I might ez well stayed out ef thar's ter be ary sich foolishness. Still, I can't let a ragin' loonytick go pawin' over me. Ef ther chain breaks I may hev' ter let go."

With a noiseless step he advanced to the light and turned up the wick so that he had a fair view of the room.

He gave a quick spring backward, for he caught sight of a pair of large eyes staring at him from the corner, which was a good deal nearer than he had thought. The light was placed within

reach of the prisoner so that he could turn it up or down at his pleasure.

The man, however, appeared to be the more startled of the two. He remained glaring at the boy, without word or motion.

"Reckon, frum w'ot I heared, you must be ole man Lane hisself, an' ther jedge may be ther biggest kind ov a fraud. I kim hyer with ther best intershuns in ther world, an' now I ain't sure but what ef some un' don't kim hyer lookin' fur me I'm a gone coon, also."

"If they—if they find you here, boy, they will kill you."

There was more of weakness than lunacy in the hesitating tones of the prisoner.

"Bless yer soul, I ain't afeared ov that, fur I'm a holy terror meself with ther irons, an' while they're gittin' riddy you bet I'll be doin' s'uthin'. What does make me squirm are ther chance they mayn't find me at all."

"Little danger of that. Day by day, year in and year out, that giant comes to taunt me and break my will. To-morrow he will come again."

"Maybe et ain't ez many year ez yer thinks; but I'm hopin' strong thar'll be one more day ov it. But him an' Sam hev' hed a leetle foolishness, to be continnered in our next. Ef they meet afore he calls hyer ag'in, Black Gorge'll be readin' his 'bituary, an' we'll hev' nothin' but ther spooks ter 'pend on."

"Men nor ghosts come here, save the one, big giant, and he speaks as though the ghosts were with him. What can you do against him?"

"Git ther drop an' bring him ter time. Ef he won't weaken, plug him fer keeps an' go on ter town. Reckon you ain't stuck up on stayin' hyer?"

"No. A thousand times, no! Get me out from here and I will make you the richest boy on earth. I will have you roll in dollars chin deep. I will—"

He stopped and stared suspiciously at the boy as though he was afraid he might be a traitor and a spy.

"Oh, I'm little, but I'm good ter tie to! Let's take a squint at them irons. I got a jackknife with a file in et, an' mebbe I kin scratch out ther rivets. Four han's 'round are better than two, an' mine ain't got ther bigness I'd like 'em ter hev' when I fly at ther throat ov Big Burk."

He spoke as seriously as if he meant it; and perhaps he did. The man in the fetters trusted him, at any rate; and the boy went to work.

Hiram Lane had tugged and worked at those fetters many a time before, but he did not then have Billy Bird to help him. In an hour or so he stood up, as the irons dropped away.

"Thank you, boy! It is the first step, they say, which counts. The rest may turn out easier. There is a little food there which we must husband until Burk, as you call him, comes again, and that will not be inside of twenty hours. Meantime you can tell me what brought you here."

The man seemed stronger in mind and body, while Billy was in the best of humor. Without hesitation he related his story.

With no tools of any strength, it was useless to think of working their way out, though they did try it after a while. The day wore on; they slept, woke again, and again slept; twenty hours, and many more than twenty hours passed, but Big Burk came not.

Dandy Davids had found his man, but he was not the man he wanted, after all. Meantime, he was a boy short.

He had set all Black Gorge to buzzing, too, and it was a little hard to tell whether the people were going to make a hero or a sacrifice of him. The judge had plenty of friends, even in his death; and half the town stood by his wife, and objected to a promiscuous raid on the Rolling Thunder mine. It had been a pretty little fight, in which the detective had come out first best; but his explanation of what lay behind it was considered to be a fairy story by a good many.

Nothing was done until daylight came. Then Mrs. Bird came to the front, at last really alarmed about Billy.

"Put me under the infloence of the sperrets an' let me foller. I kin take his trail if it's topside of the ground."

Saying this with much weeping, and in the presence of a dozen or more of the men of the Gorge, brought up a little army; and the detective, who was not unaware of his own powers in that direction, accompanied the woman to her home, followed by the crowd.

A few passes seemed to give her a second sight, and, taking up the trail where he dropped out of the window, and following it without hesitation, though the tracks of his pony led in an entirely different way, straight out to the Rolling Thunder she led them, and never paused until she stood in front of the door behind which the two prisoners were crouched.

There were tools in plenty, and the door went down before a vigorous attack, disclosing the missing boy standing there, his revolvers poised and a look of wonder on his face.

"All right, William!" shouted the sport; but Mrs. Bird rushed in and threw her arms around the neck of the lad, while Hiram Lane stole softly out—to be stopped by the man in velvet.

"I am the true Hiram Lane," he said, bracing himself up against the wall of the drift, and looking Davids firmly in the face.

"I can prove it by the scar I have and by the scars the other has, and has not. I made the strike for the Rolling Thunder, and since I have been in there I have made another. The boy owns half. Stand by me!"

At that Davids held out his hand, and the true Hiram Lane fainted.

For the rest, there is not much to tell. There was a fortune waiting in the East for Lane, but it was nothing to the strike he had made in his dungeon, when he knocked down a piece of loosely lying rock; and, even though Billy Bird received his half of the stock for which the mine was bonded, Allen Lane was sufficiently provided for.

And Ila Arbelle dealt no more faro at the Arcade, but went away, sorrowing. Her father in life had disowned her so far as she could know, but in his death she wept for him.

And the sport detective, velvet suit and all, having found his man, went away, leaving Bidwell Sloan and the rest of them to their own devices. Wisdom had been wanted for certain crimes in the past, but now that he was dead he would be wanted no longer.

The young widow made no fight to save anything out of the wreck, and was only too glad not to be called to account for any share she might have had in the plot of her artful husband.

Whatever was found in their residence went to her without question, and she drifted away. Somewhere in the great cities she is to-day a prosperous "medium," while Mrs. Bird, although in comfortable circumstances, occasionally even

yet consults the "speerits," and will doubtless do so till the end of the chapter.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers.

98 William Street, New York.